

# *Infinity Rules*

by

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# CHAPTER ONE



Landell stepped off the pavement and jammed his thumb against an antiquated buzzer, waiting to declare himself. It was an unusually warm autumn's day in London, and the dust of Tottenham Court Road had assumed an auburn glaze he didn't want to miss out on by being stuck in an ungodly office three flights up. Leaning against the buzzer with his shoulder, he continued logging the profiles of passers-by, his observations shaped by what he expected to see on a late Tuesday afternoon in September. Bookish secretaries, landlords clinging to the unravellings of the Bloomsbury way and unemployed purveyors of misdirected spending invented themselves in his mind.

"Stop pressing the damn bell," rang a tinny voice through a dusty speaker.

"It's your favourite author; buzz me in." Landell traipsed up the stairs, comforted by the pre-war smell still lingering in the wooden fittings while dreading where the impending conversation was going to pull him on what was probably the last decent day of the year. Slowing slightly between the second and third floors to ready himself for the final flight, he spotted the gallery of authors that lent weight to the name on the door facing him: Vincent Sinclair.

The scent of cigars mingled with the prevailing dustiness, challenging the Victorian makeover sitting uneasily on an office that hadn't evolved in half a century. Landell tried his best to avoid eye contact with the overflowing bookshelves and obsolete office supplies, looking downwards as he followed his agent's lead past an always empty secretary's desk and into the inner office of his literary pathfinder. "Sit down Helms," instructed Sinclair graciously. "It's always great to see my favourite and now worst-selling author. Congratulations."

"What is it you do again?" retorted Landell.

“Very good. Now if you could only write like that...”

Sinclair sat on an elevated leather chair and slid his legs under his desk, shaking his head slowly.

“Well you do inspire me.”

“Good. I always like to hear about my writers being inspired.”

Landell watched as his agent rooted through a desk drawer, presumably for a cigar, while faintly damning the outrageousness of a system in which this man could make triple what his best writer does in a year. As this reality began to seep in, Landell quickly checked himself, mentally logging that his agent was still the only person in publishing he’d ever met whom he liked. “Should you be smoking that in here?” he asked.

“You hardly expect me to go outside. Be reasonable, Landell. Anyway, to what do I owe the pleasure of a personal visit from my best and least prolific author?”

“I’m going away, and I thought you might want to know... just in case a publisher decides to return my phone calls, that is.”

Sinclair leaned back in his chair and took a puff from his unlit cigar. His dyed light brown hair and boxer’s nose appeared ridiculous above his sharp chin and brandy-induced jowls. “You need to get one of those new phones I read about... mobile callers. Isn’t that what they’ve been christened?”

“I don’t know; I haven’t seen them. Anyway, wouldn’t it be more beneficial for an agent to have one?”

“No it wouldn’t. I’m from the old school. I’m trying to get rid of writers, not take on new ones.” Sinclair stood up and walked to a small bookcase at the far side of his office, smiling sideways at Landell all the while, who in turn maintained a disinterested pose, picking at the tongue of his shoe while blankly examining it. His fidgeting was suddenly interrupted by the stomp of a hardback book landing on the desk from up high. Sinclair bowed his head like a sinister butler and repaired to the window, which he flung open while lighting his cigar. “See what you have me doing. You’re the only writer who I’d open a window for. Now take a look at that wonderful sophomore novel

in front of you. It's already been shortlisted for the Berlin Book Leaf, and you know what comes after that, don't you."

Landell leaned back in his chair uneasily, looking towards his agent, who was beaming by the open window. He wondered whether this really was a needle, a cursory deranged motivational performance or Sinclair's awkward version of levity in the face of a dying relationship. It was none of these. He was simply trying to alert his ward to the reality of games. "I suppose that's his book," stated Landell, disdainfully eyeing the corner of the wine-coloured cover, the yellow lettering jarring through his line of vision.

Sinclair positioned himself behind his chair, fists on hips, his lilac shirt and navy tie pointing towards his mostly concealed, absurdly cream linen trousers. A playful grin started to form on his face as he tried to make eye contact with Landell. "It really is some book. I must say of all the writers I've had the honour of working with..."

"Don't mention his name," interjected Landell tersely.

"But, the public loves him. The critics adore him. This just reeks of juvenile jealousy. A serious writer wouldn't give in to such petty emotions, Landell." Sinclair watched as his client's breathing deepened. He felt himself tensing and thought it best to reel his writer back in as quickly as possible. "You need to read a good book. It will give you some inspiration. "

"Oh stop. Reading books is fucking insufferable." Landell pulled himself up and straightened his posture.

"Now, now. You've only written one book. You're not allowed to be disillusioned with the process yet."

"The process?"

"Yes, the process. Writing is just half of it. And you think you can turn down a six-figure advance on your first book, a novella no less. Can't you understand that the bigger the advance, the greater the chance of your book actually being read. No, but that's not good enough for Landell Helms. You deem it preferable to go with a boutique house with virtually no capital. How do you expect me to get your next book out

there?" Landell looked at his agent disbelievingly, stroking his black hair as it struggled to gain literary length. All of Sinclair's ramblings seemed weirdly redone, like a girlfriend checking off some inarguable truths before an overhyped break-up.

"Lord, you must have been high to turn that money down," bemoaned Sinclair.

"Oh relax. You've made plenty from your stable." Landell began to pick at the loose threads on his lapel.

"Landell, my man. Writing is only half the job. You have to promote yourself; make yourself accessible, sellable."

"What's your job then?"

"The extras... the extras. You have no idea what goes into this." Landell let his eyes dart around the office, wondering how he'd managed to get himself onto the wrong end of a pep talk. He was bemused as to how being in this obsolete atmosphere somehow made him feel more prosaic, itching to issue reams of descriptive meanderings detailing tenuous links between memories and diehard characters whose resonance was probably just a random luck-out in the first place. "Helms, you need to give me something. I'd hate for this alliance to fade away, especially having gotten so close."

"Well, that's why I'm going away." Landell sat up straight again, inflecting his tone before easing back into his chair and seeing himself speak from the side of his mouth.

"It's a shame it's come to this. This should be your eagerly awaited follow-up to a best-seller. This should be your coke novel. If you were a musician, you would be burning through bales of cash in Montserrat and writing an initially maligned yet subsequently lauded sprawling epic."

"It's too late for that road," replied Landell. "I think I'm going to have to settle for the long grind."

Sinclair stood up again, going over his loosely planned schedule for the coming days, subconsciously accepting that Landell was going to be just another writer barely contributing to electricity bills. He briefly thought of the book he'd written almost forty years ago that was quickly buried and out of print

before he returned from the obligatory jaunt to pre-tourism Marbella... the time when only artists visited, even though they were tourists. He consoled himself with still being able to run in the heart of London. He clicked his tongue, bringing himself back. "Landell, you're a writer, so write. Stop trying to do something that nobody will care about. How about knocking out a beguiling coming-of-age story set in the throes of summer in the English countryside?"

"You're evil."

"No, listen up Landell: you could do that. A nice splashing of classical prose; not too dense. And then ramble on ad nauseum about the people who populate the local town, just like the people walking the streets of London right now, but more parochial: the bank teller sworn to secrecy but carrying a potentially incendiary secret of financial mismanagement; the barrow boy who hits on an unlikely fortune following a chain of bizarre events touched by the hand of God; the civil engineer counting off the days until he trades in the Renoir sketches bequeathed to him by his deceitful grandmother; the brusque policeman internally bleeding at the son he put up for adoption. You know the kind of stuff; you're a writer. Don't be cynical though. We want uplifting with some wistful bittersweet undertones."

"You're relentless." Landell stood up, motioning to leave like an offended soul who really wants to stay.

"I'm in your corner Landell. Don't forget that. Anyway, where are you off to?"

"India."

"Oh please God, no; not that India malarkey. How do you expect me to flog a book about that place?"

"I don't." Landell made his way to the door. His agent followed him like a conscientious host.

"Whatever happened to writers going to Rhodes for a voyage into the past," lamented Sinclair.

"It's a new dawn, Sinclair. The race is on... got to get some mystery while it's still available."

Sinclair patted his writer's shoulder with an awkward mixture of affection and relief as he held the door open for him, triumphantly glimpsing the past glories hanging from the wall at the top of the staircase. "Remember to keep it light, funny. Lots of funny; not like that Foster bloke. And always keep your constituency in mind."

Landell didn't look around as the door latch sounded behind him. With blood rushing from his head, transparent stars collapsed around the extremities of his vision. Steadying himself, he walked deliberately down the first few steps. As he regained control over his footing and winged the last few silver rungs leading to the asphalt plane beneath him, a dense waft of preternatural heat boomed right through his core, instantly weakening him. The heat of a Delhi afternoon thumped him in a way he had never been hit before.

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## ***CHAPTER TWO***



Landell made his way towards immigration, the red rucksack slung over his shoulder already prompting him to look for a trolley. He dumped the load onto an unattended metal carriage, began to push and was greeted with an unearthly screech. Looking down, he saw strips of plastic loosening from its rear wheels. The entire contraption was on the verge of collapse, a metallic prayer whose end point had coincided with Landell's arrival. He wondered what the chances of that were.

The arrivals hall struck Landell as resembling an aircraft hangar; he quickly realized his childhood inability to see the obvious was still intact. Joining a queue of no more than twenty passengers, he began to estimate the time it would take him to get through, hail a taxi and travel the fifteen miles or so into the city centre. An hour later, having shuffled forward no more than ten metres, he accepted it was time to reappraise his approach to scheduling. Two new arrivals in the antiquated booths reserved for immigration officials heartened him momentarily, but the moustachioed men showed no signs of raising their heads from behind the glass. A thin layer of grimy perspiration had established itself over Landell as he looked up innocently at a monstrous ceiling fan clacking in leisurely rotation. He bowed his head in submission and thought only of a hotel bed until he was beckoned by a stern middle-aged immigration official from behind sorry-looking Perspex.

"Passport," barked the commander through a pompous moustache. Landell dug in his conspicuous money belt and spilled his passport and plane ticket towards an arc in the pane of Perspex. His actions were met with a disdainful curl of the lip. "Boarding pass."

"It's inside the ticket." Landell's attempt to lend officiousness to a friendly reply was teetering on a weak foundation.

The immigration officer shuffled the ticket around, registered the boarding pass and then seethed. "And where is your boarding pass pertaining to the first leg of your flight?"

"I assumed I didn't need to keep it. I threw it away in Moscow." The creeping feeling of discomfort had Landell sweating bullets.

"Why would you do such a ridiculous thing?" Landell kept looking at the officer's moustache as he rapidly typed a multitude of numbers into a system with a prototypical screen before leafing through the Englishman's passport with unhealthy curiosity, summoning one of his colleagues over when he was at a loss to identify a particular stamp. Upon reaching the end of the stamped pages, he proceeded to examine the passport one more time, back to front, shaking his head from time to time at some perceived sleight to India committed by Landell in his choice of destinations. After a few disappointed exhalations, he addressed his quarry. "What do you think you were doing in Morocco?"

Landell ignored the voice instructing him to tell the man to go and fuck off. He stared right in his inquisitor's eyes, expressionless. "My mother died there."

A cascade of chins appeared on the immigration officer's face as he tried to bury his tongue. He desperately searched for an empowering follow-up. "And how long will you be frequenting India for?"

"I'm not sure. Two months; probably less now that I think of it." The official nodded circuitously and sent Landell on with a flick of his fingers. Loping through the unmanned customs checkpoints, he was soon in the midst of a harrowing cacophony of hawking taxi drivers, determined to plough him with disinformation as he looked mournfully at a shuttered tourist kiosk. Hoisting his backpack square onto his shoulders, Landell swatted a couple of wishful drivers out of the way and headed for the exit.

Outside, the violent glare of an afternoon sun bouncing off asphalt coupled with rank humidity put Landell on survival

mode straight out of the gate. Peering off to his left, he saw a rabble of what looked like motorbikes with yellow carapaces jockeying for position. A family of five was arguing with a skinny driver, forcing themselves one by one onto the seat under the yellow cover. Bags and boxes protruded comically from every angle as the machine began to waver down towards the exit ramp. Looking to his right, Landell saw a sea of grey taxis but only a couple of drivers peering towards him. As he began to walk in their direction, one of the men broke away, laughing disdainfully, while the other addressed Landell with an officious smirk. "Which hotel, sir?"

"No hotel."

"Ah, then I can take you to a very auspicious hotel. You are French, right?" The driver patted his hands against his linen-covered chest while desperately holding his breath.

"I want to go to Connaught Place, and never call me French."

"Of course, sir. Please get in." After a few minutes of subconscious groping, Landell finally realized what the mysterious scent was that had been flooding his lungs: urine... and it was coming from every direction. Fortunately, the overheating taxi engine was spewing out just enough fumes to partially mask the smell, and combined with the cheap cigarette stench emanating from the driver, the overall effect was beginning to seep into Landell's mind as a marker of necessity.

As soon as the taxi had made it to airport exit, it conked out. Straightening his Krishna image in the centre of a hard plastic dashboard, the driver turned and smiled peacefully at his passenger while jiggling the keys in the ignition to no effect. After five or six attempts, with Landell suggesting that he'd flooded the engine, the driver triggered his pride into action, shuttling down a ramp and stalling at the turn onto a scrappy highway to settle some dispute with a colleague that veered between furious indignation and brotherly love. Landell observed as the two drivers remonstrated with each other, taking turns to wag fingers and rotate their heads furiously. He

was surprised when his driver, the bigger of the two, skulked towards him while shaking his head, apparently cowed by the clean-shaven doughy-faced man he'd been going at it with. Before he could get back into the driver's seat, his colleague had draped one arm around his shoulder from behind while stuffing some notes into his shirt pocket with the other. Landell heard both mutter *acha*.

"You'd better put that meter on, sir," said Landell as soon as his driver had sat down.

"Meter broken. It's okay; same fare for everyone... only five hundred rupees."

"It's three hundred prepaid at the taxi counter in the airport, and no more than two hundred and fifty for locals. You can have three hundred or let me out here," stated Landell in a resigned monotone.

"No, that is not possible," protested the driver, turning around to face his passenger, who was busy noticing the absence of a rear-view mirror.

The creasing tiredness of his plane journey married with the insane amount of dust finding its way into the taxi to elicit a rising anger in Landell that he hadn't felt since adolescence. It soon coursed through his veins and had him visualizing lunging at the taxi driver and securing a rear choke as the car veered pitifully onto a dusty off-road with his victim grasping for a totem of Krishna. But the background thought of a soft hotel bed to assuage his jetlag began to deplete his fury. "Stop the car now, you fuck," growled Landell.

"*Acha, acha, acha...* three hundred is okay, brother. "Why so angry?" Landell dropped his head against the side of the car, letting the rampant dust cake his face. Glimpsing himself in a dying wing mirror, his features had taken on a prehistoric golden attraction. The sound of the driver suddenly pumping the accelerator initially scared but then comforted Landell as his ride began to roll with speed.

Swathes of barren ground with the occasional sorry clump of vegetation were only broken at junctions or superfluous

traffic lights by random cows snuffling through roadside garbage or young boys wheeling banjaxed bikes or playing with inner tubes. Seemingly pointless police stops came and went, sometimes requiring the taxi driver to stand his ground belligerently but more often leading to the handing over of a few coins while officers infuriatingly looked to the distance as the driver muttered dejectedly. The miles went by with no sign of a capital city, and Landell began to notice the soft defeat in the eyes of his carrier and feel pathetically guilty for his own puerile conniption.

An unfinished shell of an apartment block slid into view, its concrete exterior daubed with sheets of plastic and truncated steel fittings. A stream of whiffs blared through the open window, each one kicking Landell back to that time in his childhood when such paints and solvents had yet to be made illegal in his homeland. It was chemical bliss, a nostalgic meandering less fleeting than any of those he had happened upon in recent years. The dry air allowed hazardous elements to find their way deep into his bloodstream while the suburbs gathered around him. As traffic increased, so did the driver's impatience, cyclists holding onto cars inducing his wrath, street vendors' herculean efforts to steer rickety portable shops fuelling his sense of comparative advantage and stray children garnering gentler admonitions. Only the cows were safe from his scorn, dismissively stalling in front of his car to sift through roadside offerings.

"So this is what's necessary," mused Landell. The writer's anticipated passage to acceptance among those who determined his constancy was testing him with banality in its first guise, but he could already feel he was getting himself into a different type of universe. The idea of flitting between Ionian islands and throwing in a few hikes in the name of discovery now seemed like an attractive alternative. He cursed himself for his stubborn drift towards what he knew he wouldn't be able to prove was authenticity.

“Really, my friend,” interrupted the driver, “there is a new tax on petrol. It’s very serious situation for everyone here. You are knowing these politicians are all corrupt: baksheesh, baksheesh, baksheesh.” The driver released a clenched fist into a disdainful star to emphasize his point. “And my baby needs milk,” he added, determined to trump his passenger.

Landell was nearly spent. The thought of locating a hotel was draining his last reserves of energy. He knew he was going to lose the first battle of his campaign. It was now just a question of limiting damage to fight another day. He looked at a broken wing mirror and caught the driver eyeing him voraciously. “I’ll give you a fifty rupee tip if you drop me at a hotel that costs less than seven hundred rupees a night and isn’t a shithole.”

The driver shook his head halfway around, not bothering to bring it back from his right shoulder. “I know a very nice place for eight hundred,” he offered tentatively, smiling becomingly with hooded eyes.

“Is that including your commission?”

“No, no, no,” protested the driver. “It’s my cousin’s hotel; he is a fair man. He will give you the best rate. “No commission... my word of honour.”

“It’d better be good,” threatened Landell lazily.

“It’s the best one, and not so far from Connaught Circus. Of course, petrol will make price a little bit more.” The driver checked the wing mirror comically and copped his passenger’s expression of disapproval. Through an undetectable slit in his eyelashes, Landell noticed the knitted forehead of his driver and smirked. “No extra charge for you boss, of course. You are sharing business with my family. That is enough. And anything you need, you just ask. It’s no problem.”

Landell exhaled, already unsure which button he needed to press to deactivate prostitution and select drugs. Sleep was the only thing that interested him, and until he had had his fill of it, no culture would be getting in his way. The streets were bottlenecking more and more as his fading brain tried to make

sense of the images that flashed before him: beggars jamming their hands through the car window and up to his face, gaurs swinging their tails to misdirect fleas towards his line of vision, ripped young women replete with brightly-coloured saris carrying insane loads on their heads, middle-aged sidewalk warriors staring psychotically at him while jettisoning blood-red betel residue towards the gutter and decrepit mendicants tragically flailing at the tourists moving past them just out of reach.

The taxi suddenly pulled up in the middle of a melee that Landell didn't want any part of. The driver smiled desperately and told his passenger he would be no more than a moment. Landell watched him take two steps towards a street vendor selling cigarettes and what appeared to be sachets of chewing stuff. Within seconds, they were getting into an intense conversation, gesticulating dismissively while a surrounding cast of men wearing what looked like nightgowns got involved in the dispute. A few crowd members peeled away and began to glare into the taxi. Landell closed his eyes and sank an imaginary foot lower into the dishevelled back seat, drawing a line under any attempt to figure out what reality he had gotten himself into.

"Okay, now we go to hotel," said the driver gleefully, jolting his passenger by crashing his door shut.

Landell stirred, losing the stream of disconnected images that had momentarily shut down his senses. "So, did you solve your dispute then," he drawled, opening his eyes as he felt the car hitting a safe speed.

"No dispute my friend, just business." The driver turned to face his passenger and winked gleefully. The next time Landell opened his eyes he saw the driver outside the car looking in, beaming while thumbing towards a hotel sign hanging over a dilapidated cream-coloured door. Dizzy, Landell dragged his rucksack along a stretch of cracked asphalt, making his way to the smallest reception area he had ever seen. To his left, a flight of dingy steps led towards what must have been the rooms. A pompous septuagenarian gently shook his head at the sight of

his new guest. "Best hotel for price," suggested the driver hopefully while the boss produced a monstrous ledger from underneath his desk.

"Passport," the old man ordered solemnly while flicking through his tome, determined not to make eye contact. Landell watched as he fastidiously travelled across the page with his pen, occasionally raising his eyes to examine his guest more closely before completing a column to his satisfaction. With a swirl, he rotated the guestbook and demanded a signature. Automatically moving his eyes to the column containing details of the most recently checked-in guest's home country, Landell saw 'France'. Tracing his finger further up the column, he noticed another couple of similar entries. "Air-con or fan?" the boss languidly asked.

"He's an English gentleman. He'll be requiring air-con," the driver interjected.

"And how long will you be staying with us, sir?" Landell prized the room key from the manager's outstretched hand, offered a partial explanation as to his plans and muttered something about his necessity to use the bathroom immediately. The parting image he experienced from halfway up the stairs was that of the driver remonstrating forlornly with the proprietor, who nodded bizarrely towards Landell while alternating between dismissing and placating the taxi driver with ancient-looking hand signals.

Landell could barely focus as he entered the L-shaped room, tripping over the corner of a bed covered in damaged sheets and pre-war blankets. Above him, a fan revolved lazily. Looking around he located what he thought must have been the air-conditioner: an open sore of a contraption, stray panels barely hanging on and an absurdly chunky lever functioning as an activation switch. He pulled it like an intrepid monkey. A blazing whirr sounding like a nuclear warning filled the room and scythed deep into his consciousness. He shut it off with a palm strike, mentally admitted defeat and flopped onto the bed,



burying himself in a smell that only registered via a dusty image of his grandfather's attic.

Landell awoke to the sound of a bicycle bell ringing somewhere beneath his window, with adolescent voices overriding the plaintive barks of an old dog. As he moved his body, he felt a ripping feeling right across the base of his skull, forcing him to drop his head back onto the pillow. A murky sweat rolled off his body as he turned to the window to try to glean some clue of the time. The air was heavy, devoid of oxygen. He looked up at the ceiling; the fan had ceased its titillating rotation. A cavern began to form in his stomach, kicking right through to the base of his skull. It was time to go out and see what he had gotten himself into.

Brushing past a ragged circle of pre-teens following dice down a drain outside the front door of the guesthouse, Landell quickened his step to avoid getting tapped. He saw a junction with a sun-scorched thoroughfare up ahead and barely heard the frantic screeches of the boys behind him seeing their mark slipping towards the impenetrable crowds. The glare coupled with the heavy air had him listing towards the partially canopied edges of the street the moment he stepped onto it. Vendors beckoned him with an epic selection of goods and foods, most of which he could barely identify. His stomach was issuing the weirdest groan while feeling bloated, and the heat was already wearing him down after twenty yards of avoiding kerb-hangers looking for static. He needed food, but he was drawing thin. A huge roundabout with a small grassy area in its centre lay ahead like a yawning chasm. Landell had an idea that way led to some former hippie enclave, but he needed immediate energy to tackle such a beast.

"Sir, can I be helping you?" Landell turned to see a middle-aged man, smallish but happily pot-bellied, beaming at him from underneath a well-kept moustache. A piebald jumper sat uneasily over a pristine white lungi.

"I was just looking for a café."

"Sir is wanting coffee?"

“No, something to eat; something small.”

“This way sir. I can make you a very nice snack.” The man pointed to a small gap in a wall between shops and a steel counter jutting from nowhere. “Pakora, samosa, rice, the finest vegetables and lentil soup,” declared the man assuredly while pulling out a pink plastic chair for Landell to flop onto. “Drink, sir?”

“Yeh, a Coke.” The proprietor pushed a boy of no more than eight into the breach in the wall and barked some orders at him, seemingly admonishing him on the way. Landell swivelled to catch a glimpse of a rusty space behind a plastic curtain. It was the grimmest looking area he’d ever seen inside a structure. Right there, he swore himself off investigating the inner workings of food supply for the rest of his trip.

The time seemed to have been dripping by since he woke up. Landell waited as the café owner took an eternity to rustle up change for a hundred-rupee note. Standing with his back to the throngs of pavement peddlers, he traced his eyes across Connaught Circus, with its parched grassy strips offering an obscene respite to the pollution-heavy air. He decided to jaywalk through the gridlocked traffic, aiming for tiny gaps that car drivers felt obliged to hurtle towards, regardless of which direction they were supposed to be heading. Motorcyclists’ routes weren’t defined by space; they’d either make room or get around a lack of it. Stepping onto a pavement that formed a perimeter around the circus, Landell caught a glimpse of four black-eyed men crouched among a cover of fragmented linoleum passing squares of tin foil among each other and rocking methodically. A feeling somewhere between trepidation and inevitability momentarily seized Landell, and he skipped towards the interior of the circus. From three different directions, he was immediately marked: a snake charmer approached from his left, a man strewn with leather belts and wallets came from the right and a de-limbed panhandler ferociously shuffled at him head-on. Desperately trying to avert his eyes from the simpering motions of the beggar, Landell

aggressively shouldered the leather seller out of the way, turned sideways and held his hands up in aggravated warning. The gesture was returned by the jilted charmer holding his livelihood up in a threatening pose, jabbing the air with the snake's head while Landell put more and more distance between himself and his pursuers, feeling whiter and whiter as he went. Backing up towards the far side of the circus, he felt his heel hit a ledge. He turned to see a heavy-lidded portly man peering at him with bemused disdain. "You are coming from?" he demanded.

"Just over there." Landell pointed innocently.

"Nooo... you are coming from. Which country?"

"Ah, I'm English." The man harrumphed and looked more closely at Landell's get-up. A baggy blue shirt over a pair of khaki utility trousers seemed to disappoint the local. He curled his mouth up, inducing Landell to calculate the factor to which the cost of his clothes exceeded those confronting him: an absurd threadbare tweed jacket and Terylene slacks.

"Where did you school?" the man continued.

"What?"

"I expect you're going to Paraganj."

"Where?" asked Landell.

"It is where all the tourists stay, except for businessmen of course. You will find your countrymen there. Better for you to stay with them."

"Why?"

"You will be more comfortable there. It is set up for tourists." The man seemed strangely proud of peddling instructions.

"Well, I'm not a tourist," insisted Landell.

"Of course you are. Anyway, it is just over that way." The man motioned bizarrely with one hand somewhere up in the air leaving Landell feeling slighted and not understanding why. "You can take a rickshaw. Don't pay any more than five rupees."

"Yeh, okay." Landell moved away defensively, oblivious to the fact that he had garnered more information from a man he had dismissed as ignorant than he would receive for a long time.

Looking towards where he believed the man had pointed, a cycle rickshaw driver pulled up, fuelling his burgeoning paranoia. "What the fuck is going on?"

"Where is sir going?" enquired a teenage rickshaw operator, wiping something liquid from his hands onto his cheek.

"Pra ganja," stuttered Landell.

"Pa-ra-ganjjj," enunciated the boy, smiling.

"Seven rupees," mumbled Landell, embarrassed as he calculated the exchange rate but compressing his face to force down the creeping guilt.

"Noooo," exclaimed the boy, hurt streaming from his eyes as he set off on his way with the heavy Western load a familiar feeling. Landell leaned back on a blue hard plastic seat and nearly tipped over the side as the boy methodically slammed down on a pedal before freewheeling for a few yards and then slamming down on the other pedal.

"Whoa," shouted Landell, and his driver shot an enormous toothy smile back at him. The air was beginning to lose density, its dispersion allowing the early evening smells of urban India to take precedence: charcoal, urine and the slightly putrid precursor to the first mosquitoes of the night hung around Landell's senses, making him aware of the smallest reactions in his exposed flesh. Letting his head loll to one side, he took in the images that flashed by in the fading light. Turbaned men's eyes followed him intently when he was within their range; overweight families launched themselves in front of the rickshaw to shave seconds off their transit time; and mopeds carrying extended clans floated past nonplussed by Landell's gasping incredulity. He couldn't figure out why he felt safer high up on a rickshaw than down on the sidewalks.

The rickshaw *wallah* veered right as the road widened, navigating through crowds of people milling about in front of a Victorian-looking building. Landell rubbernecked in an attempt to figure out what he was passing, but the din soon receded as his carrier looped up a small hill towards an overpass. As they

exited a slip road and onto the highway, he caught sight of a rusty signpost pointing back down where he had just come from. The word Paraganj was revealed by the one working headlight of a passing van. He smiled and wondered how long he would wait to alert his wallah that he knew he was being taken around the houses. The disappearing twilight was enough of a prompt. Barrelling down a highway with unlit trucks exercising their eminence at the head of the present order, Landell tapped the driver's shoulder. "Time to go back, boss."

"Yes sir, going to Paraganj." The boy's eyes flitted from side to side despite his best efforts to look innocent.

"It's back there. You can cycle for as long as you want but it's still seven rupees."

"Turning here, sir. It's the new traffic system. It's thirty rupees." Landell protruded his lower face, lowered his eyelids and shook his head slowly. "But sir. I am cycling for a long time."

"If you stop messing around and go straight to Paraganj, I might give you ten rupees, and a tip of course."

"A tip, sir. Yes, direct to Paraganj."

As the teenage rickshaw wallah freewheeled down from the highway to the rear of Paraganj, the whole journey began to crystallize in Landell's mind. Thirty minutes of highway pollution was a good trade-off for the wallah against his certitude of having caught a fresh one. At that moment, Landell realized he needed to wipe all traces of foreign clean off himself as soon as possible. He palmed a ten-rupee note into the boy's open hand, flipped him an unfathomable coin and shook his head in mock disappointment. The boy knitted his brow in wronged sadness as Landell disappeared into the tourist realm.

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## ***CHAPTER THREE***



The faces came at Landell thick and fast. Long Aryan features on sallow palettes interspersed with darker and fuller Dravidian screens, as well as pinched in-between visages with beautifully formed aspects stapling the scene together. And on the narrow, teeming street he was forcing himself down, there were foreigners too... plenty of them. Frail, wan looking northern Europeans, replete with raggedy cotton trousers and sub-psychedelic t-shirts mingled among opportunistic street traders while bouncy trekkers angled their backpacks into narrow doorways. Chino-wearing older travellers, books in hand, flitted between air-conditioned stores as moneyed, dreadlocked tourists looked on, happily entrenched in their blinkered pecking order.

Landell didn't know what he was looking for, if anything. He felt like he was ghosting past the players on Paraganj. Occasionally, he would catch a snippet of conversation from foreigners haggling awkwardly with indignant vendors—French, German and English accents seemed to be predominant among the visitors—or disbelievingly with the more gracious traders beckoning marks into their government-backed emporia. After reaching the end of the street, he looked around and saw eerie darkness just feet away from the main thoroughfare. It was as if nothing existed behind the gargantuan splash servicing the tourists, as if everything had culminated in one, short stretch where the issue of an organism's labour and consumption buzzed in hollow constancy. He momentarily felt the allure of the apparently empty streets just out of view, even if they were unattended and smeared with layers of decay.

Landell wearily dropped himself onto a stool outside the last cheap-looking restaurant he could spot before the street action faded away. A boy of about nine appeared out of nowhere to wipe down a plastic table with a filthy dishcloth,

handing Landell an almost illegible laminated menu. Scouring the list of drinks, he decided to take a gamble on a banana lassi, innocently assuming it was the safest fruit. Looking out at the passers-by, they all seemed dressed down to some compromise until a real beacon shone through... a true hippy, years of grime caked into his dreadlocks. He looked about forty, and Landell immediately assigned him to the 1970s diaspora, genuinely impressed with his disinterested poise as he conversed with a cigarette seller by an incense-fuelled kiosk. Turning in anticipation of his arriving lassi, Landell spotted a table of perfectly even-tanned shoulder-length dreadlocked, bejewelled tourists in an adjacent restaurant. He looked back outside to the cigarette-buying hippie, who nodded to him placidly, transmitting a disinterested tone through the codified ramblings of the young followers who were burning into Landell's thoughts. These may have been holders of a truth, or the truth they were representing may have held something, but he knew he was down to the end of his wick.

"Goa is amazing, but you have to travel Rajasthan if you want to know the real India," asserted a young male.

"Yeah, I wanted to spend more time there, but I had to finish my course at the ashram," replied a female voice. "I mean that's why I came to India. I suppose it's nice to see the real India, but for me it was about cleansing and healing in preparation..."

Landell slurped loudly on the remnants of his drink to block out the voices, holding his arm up to beckon the boy but steadfastly refusing to turn his gaze away from the street. "Bill please," he requested, rooting in his pocket for stray notes.

"Yes sir, bill is coming." Landell writhed in his chair so as to not change his field of vision while retrieving the notes. His head bobbed involuntarily until he sensed the paper within the grasp of his thumb and index finger.

"It's good to see some tourist places while you're here," opined another female voice. "I think you can do both. Of course the spiritual journey is more important."

“Yes, but it’s about being in the places where you can find the timeless wisdom, and that’s why I had to spend so much time on my retreat,” added another male voice, drawling in an East Coast African-American accent. Sai was more than I could ever have imagined.” Landell checked the price on the menu, and dropped his largest note down on the table, turning and barreling through chairs in his desperation to get away. The suspicions of the boy turned to glee upon seeing what had been left behind, his quizzical expression following Landell until he disappeared from view.

A swarthy, slick-haired man in an overstyled leather jacket angled his head as an in to a conversation as Landell walked past his small yellow-fronted shop. A white board emblazoned with red stickered prices sat in a darkened window. “Where are you going, sir?” asked a deep voice.

Landell looked at him with just enough disbelief to cause the man to assume a welcoming demeanour. “I’m going back to my hotel.”

“No sir. I mean where are you visiting in India?” The man approached with his hand held out. Landell shook it tentatively. “Maybe I can help you sir. I am authorized travel agent, licensed by the Tourist Board.”

“Really?” Landell wanted to keep walking but resigned himself to needing a break from the dusty, sweaty face-pack that was accumulating on him.

“Yes, I’m organizing many tours all around India: Taj Mahal, Rajasthan, special desert tours. Whichever you are liking.”

“No thanks. I have to meet someone in Goa; no time for tours.”

The travel agent sidled between Landell and the passing human traffic, ushering his prospect into a narrow office. He pulled a pile of magazines from a metal chair, brushed it off with his jacket sleeve and motioned to Landell to sit down. “I have some bad news, sir.”

“Oh yeah.”



"The train to Goa is cancelled." The travel agent creased his face and shook his head in shared disappointment, stroking his moustache with the side of his index finger.

Landell considered the news for a few moments and rejected it: a week to Christmas and no trains to the most popular destination in the entire subcontinent. This was a work, and he prided himself on knowing a work when he encountered one. "Well, I'll just check it out at the train station," he bluffed. The thought of fighting his way through a few hundred baying locals to ask a question of a counter clerk was more than his constitution would accept. His mind was circling in search of an out, but it was already detaching from his usual direction, gently pushing away.

"Trains to the south are not going from this station," asserted the tour operator, leaning back in his chair and supportively shaking his head for his crestfallen mark.

"Which station?" The man waved his hand behind him, signifying there was a possibility nearby. The circuitous rickshaw ride of the previous night flashed through Landell's mind. "Oh right. Well, I suppose I'll have to take a bus."

"Too far, sir. Airplane is best chance."

"That's not going to happen," declared Landell. "What's the closest city to Goa I can get a train to, then?"

The man rotated his head discouragingly before retrieving a dog-eared booklet from his desk drawer. Flicking through the pages, he paused from time to time to shake his head in exasperation. He looked at Landell surreptitiously to see how far he could push it. "You want to be on the beach for Christmas, sir. Of course, I understand." Landell remained motionless, chalking this latest episode up to experience while availing of temporary relief from another wheezing fan. "Why everyone want to be on beach? I don't understand what has happened to the British Empire," queried the man.

"I don't. I just have to meet someone in Goa."

"I see. Don't worry I will fetch you to a nearby place; and then a bus for the remainder of the journey. Acha... But you'll

have to leave from another station, fifteen kilometres from here.”

“That’s fine. When can you have the ticket?”

“Tomorrow, *Insha’Allah*.”

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Landell was back on Paraganj. The throng had thinned, with vendors boarding up their shop fronts and tourists standing outside guesthouses, rapping it up. Words hung in the air before attaching themselves to his flimsy knowledge of the status quo.

“Agra’s a must,” declared an American drawl.

“Kerala is more authentic,” shrieked another.

“Ellora,” “Pushkar,” “Udaipur.”

The airy exultations of a cacophony of dills had Landell almost sprinting to get to the end of the street, so desperate was he that he unintentionally lamped a prostrate beggar in the arm before luckily stumbling into an auto-rickshaw to break his fall. The beggar’s delayed reaction of indescribable pain upon realizing his lucky break caused Landell to snap. “What the fuck are you doing down there?” he screeched. The beggar held out his hands, unsure whether he was claiming compensation or standard poverty. “What? You think I’m going to give you money after you nearly killed me. Are you fucking insane?” Realizing he wasn’t going to get paid, the beggar attempted to tap into a vortex of pity that would have put a starving dog to shame. The intensity of his prostrations was beyond brainwashed Buddhist. The final few came with surreptitious glances to Landell, who looked on with primed concentration. The beggar pulled himself up on his haunches and began to mutter angrily, the occasional guttural inflection initially hissed towards his assaulter and then to anyone still watching the show. Landell walked away, feeling guilty only at the conceited thought he had broken the beggar’s spirit.

Away from the partially lit awnings of Paraganj, Landell looked towards Connaught Circus and only saw darkness. Traces

of cinnamon scent died quickly under the overwhelming fusion of carbon emissions and urine. He wanted to walk back to his guesthouse but had no idea which radial to take. Feeling his way along the edge of the road while trying not to plunge into an adjacent open sewer, he treaded precariously between threatening viruses and kerb-crawling rickshaw drivers who took turns to cut him off in order to force a negotiation.

“Where going, sir?” shouted most of them.

“I take you... roads are dangerous,” offered one obliviously.

“Paraganj is other way. You are going wrong,” added another presciently.

Landell stopped about fifty yards short of the roundabout in a vain attempt to collect his bearings. Lights beamed from the perimeter of the circus, with occasional neon signs only contributing to the confusion as he tried to tag reference points. Noticing that drivers were more than happy to gamble with his life, he stepped sideways across the narrowing neck of a gutter and onto a small grass embankment. A slightly spongy feel underfoot had him looking down in confusion. A strip of carpet interlaced with weeds seemed to be growing out of the hillside in an unlikely naturalistic harmony, seamlessly blending with the concrete border of the gutter. From nowhere, two men were blocking him from stepping back onto the roadside. Deep in gesticulation, the pair turned to peer at the tourist, first with suspicion and then with civil anticipation. “What is it that you are doing there, sir?”

“Why?” retorted Landell. “Is this your pile of rubbish?”

The closer of the two, a rotund middle-aged man, screwed his face in disdain. His pudgy nose made a mockery of his haughty air as he vacillated between demanding an explanation and not wanting to engage with an irate foreigner. “I am responsible for this area,” he stated, raising his voice to quench his lack of conviction.

The other, slightly younger man looked a whole lot more physical but approached with a smile. His skeletal face deepened

his casual courage, at least from Landell's view in the flickering light. "You are very welcome in Delhi, brother," he announced while stretching his hand out in friendly anticipation.

Landell shook his hand softly while boldly checking him out. "So, is there a problem?" he asked.

"No sir... no problem. Actually, there was a problem in this vicinity last month. It was a very inauspicious event."

"Really," asked Landell archly.

"Yes sir; a most unfortunate natural disaster. A large water pipe burst. People died, homes were ruined. I lost a cousin in the catastrophe. It was total chaos."

"I'm sorry to hear that," replied Landell as he observed the older man seething at being marginalized.

"Well, it was the monsoon. It's what Nature wanted, and chaos can be a beautiful, natural thing even if it means all being wiped away."

"Yes indeed," concurred Landell. "I'd better be off; got to get back to my hotel. It was nice meeting you." Landell flicked a gaze towards the older man, who lowered his eyes.

As he walked away, the final farewell of the younger man rang in his ears. "You are a welcome guest to India."

From the centre of Connaught Circus, Landell scoped the radials once again, hoping to spot the café he'd had a drink at earlier that day. He'd made himself an easy mark, and within seconds an orange-clad man replete with a garlanded necklace and searching eyes had determined to engage him. Bowing with ceremony, the holy man rattled some kind of metal canister resembling an urn up to Landell's face. Backing up, Landell did his best impression of a local looking to ward off unwelcome outsiders. "I can see you're a searcher," the holy man asserted. Landell let his face drop wearily, wondering if he had it in him to plough through another forced reception. "Yes, a true searcher," continued the man.

"I think you've got the wrong person," replied Landell.

“Ahh... modesty. I am a sadhu. My temple is far from here, but sometimes I am coming to Delhi to deliver very important lectures. It is only by chance we meet here tonight.”

Landell was already mentally face down on his bed in the guesthouse, geeing himself up to have another crack at the air-con. “Well, it was nice meeting you. I’ve got to get back to my hotel to take a shower.”

“Ah, I see,” continued the sadhu, undeterred. “You think Delhi is dirty, but is it really dirty?”

“Well, yes it is,” replied Landell.

“But it depends on the way you look at it. Maybe from your rich hometown, which is clean, now you see a dirty place. But compared to some places in India, Delhi is clean. ..”

“My hometown isn’t particularly clean, but Delhi is straight-up filthy.”

“Exactly. But then your hometown is dirty compared to a cleaner, richer town. You see, my friend, it is all relative. Nowhere is really dirty, and nowhere is really clean.”

“Ok. If you say so.”

“Yes, it is so. That, my friend, is the real theory of relativity.”

“Well, thanks for the em... information.” Landell nodded as he walked past the defunct guru, putting the past few hours down to a bad run.

“Don’t forget, my friend. Every searcher needs a guide sometimes.” Landell didn’t look back, instead striding past the remaining night hawkers and straight onto a busy road, navigating traffic with canine skill. He headed for the nearest radial, trusting he was due a smooth passage. Stalling, he logged a panoramic scan of the surrounding shops; a black pole he’d barely registered earlier in the day confirmed his bearings. Finally smiling broadly, Landell’s eyes rested on a cracked chunk of pavement by his feet. Nearly touching him, motionless almost to the point of invisibility, was an incredibly old-looking beggar. Though the man’s eyelids were closed, Landell was convinced he was being registered. His motionless poise failed to be disturbed

by the presence of a lumbering white mark. Landell looked more closely at the man's pearl white skin, unadorned except for a dying rag of a lungi hanging off him. The man looked totally serene.

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## CHAPTER FOUR



As soon as you navigate the insanity that masquerades as an airport in good ol' New Delhi, assuming you manage to exchange money at the official, government-guaranteed booth without the reptilian fuckstick behind the screen trying to palm a big bill while he hands you a bewildering bundle of borderline currency, you'll need to deal with the man who will one way or another break you before you eventually scramble away from this planet's spiritual home... the auto-rickshaw driver. Yes sir, the only way you will finance a realistically lengthy trip in India, and that means at least three months, is passing on luxury car taxis and accepting your fate of being tortured by these men of the wheel.

So, I walked straight past the hordes of officially registered government taxi drivers, and their extortionate rates, ignoring their claims that auto-rickshaws weren't allowed in the airport, and kept on through the car park to the edge of the adjacent highway, and there they were in their yellow and black glory. I was ready for these vultures. I knew I was going to get fucked, but I was determined to get full value for their win. In a flash, one of them had separated from the herd; he had unknowingly volunteered himself. "Hello boss," I opened.

"Namaste sir," he replied reflexively, eying the small orange rucksack hanging from my shoulder.

"Connaught Circus boss: how much?"

"Only two hundred rupees, sir."

"That's not possible, boss. You'll have to use the meter," I suggested, pointing at a duct-tape concealed computer of truth.

"Meter is broken, sir."

"Yeah, and I think I know who the culprit is. Okay boss, I'll give you eighty rupees."

"Sir, that's not possible."

"Yes, it is. It's sixty-five rupees for locals, so I'm giving you an extra twenty per cent. Plus, I'm alone, so it'll be quicker for you."

"One hundred and fifty rupees is my best price. You can check guide book."

“What guide book. I don’t have a guide book. What the fuck do you think I am?” I smiled and turned away, looking solicitously at a couple of drivers who had approached with the hope of at least getting involved in an argument.

My original target closed the distance I had created like a seasoned grappler. “One hundred and twenty is best price for you because you are a gentleman.”

I squinted at him in disbelief. “First boss, I am not a gentleman. And second, I know the real price. I’ll give you a bit extra because I’m a tourist, but I’m a poor tourist. Boss, I can get a share taxi for one hundred rupees, but I’d rather give the money to you.”

“Acha... thank you sir. Okay, one hundred rupees.”

“Eighty.”

“Ninety; ten for the bag.” I smiled and squeezed my Western frame into his brilliant death trap. He turned around beaming, making me feel had, and pointed to a print of Shiva jammed between a Perspex windshield and the rickshaw’s handlebars. “You know Shiva, brother?” he asked while flexing his entire body into a kick start. The rickshaw stubbornly bucked, but he viciously jammed down on the pedal again, bossing his bike like a deluded wrangler trying to control a horse. It reluctantly coughed into action, and the rickshaw wallah turned around once more with a huge grin. “This is Shiva, brother,” he reiterated.

“I know, baba. Shiva is my master too.”

“No, you joke brother,” he shouted as he picked up speed on the highway.

“I never joke about Shiva,” I shouted. “I am a true baba, baba.” The driver pulled a dusty scarf over his mouth and squeezed the throttle, ripping past fellow rickshaw drivers transporting major baggage and overtaking cars on the inside while gesticulating wildly if they dared lean on him. I had lucked out with this driver. He knew it was fuck or be fucked on the roads of India, and he was a self-styled timeless Shiva linga.

I had planted a seed, but I felt the driver may have been playing up his devotion to Shiva for a tourist dividend. Relaxing as best I could in the cramped back seat of this node pulse of Hindustan, enjoying the breezy sense of liberty the entrance to India always seemed to offer, I welcomed the heavy air weighed



down with pollution. It was a nostalgic taste, so much more natural than the chemically cleansed atmospheres of so-called developed countries. It represented an impressive spectrum: some odours too much to take with good grace, while others ran through my proteins, fuelling my receptors and tiding me over until I could secure something more direct. Somehow, I managed to zone out from the standard vistas of incredulity that a road trip into Delhi inflicts on a teetering tourist. Shiva linga dropped me off at the entrance to Paraganj with an empty promise of returning with some real Shiva. I didn't doubt his sincerity of intention, but I knew the only thing he'd return with would be a story. So the transition was complete. I had let myself loose in the Big Game. I looked back towards the train station, sucked my teeth and decided to dump my bag in a guesthouse before dealing with the nuttiness of attempting to secure a ticket. I mentally recited the first rule of India: get the fuck out of Delhi as soon as possible. I then recapitulated the golden rule: avoid the bullshit triangle at all costs, which meant no Rajasthan, Agra or Goa.

No Spartan had laid eyes on a room as desolate as the one I paid two hundred rupees for just off Paraganj. The upside was that I didn't need to worry about rats bothering me in that fucking prison hole. Still, it was only one night; and I'd be sleeping for most of it. All I needed to do was secure a train ticket to Pathankot, the Crewe of India; get a meal into me, one that would stay in me; and locate a real throwback hippie, the type who could be trusted to have sourced the best deal for smoke.

Paraganj was a sorry scene ripped out of the fake history books. Misty-eyed meme hangers-on desperately ascribing long-gone characteristics to random tourist triggers, sickly-looking searchers trying to ignore the horrific misrepresentation of India peddled by travel books, and milky-eyed yoga heads missing the point by a country mile intermingled in oblivious delusion. It was magnificent. Misguided backpackers edgily shared cannabinoid theories while sitting at tables shoehorned into crannies outside cafes lazily daubed with images of Bob Marley while plainclothes policemen watched eagle-eyed from adjoining premises, ready to swoop at the first sign of a novice move. I decided that I would have to get some food into me before I began to tackle the tasks of the day. Jamming my earphones deep into my lobes, even though

my Walkman was without batteries, I headed back towards the train station. There seemed to be a shift happening in the hippie world: the old ones, or young ones following the old ways, were being out-competed by the new, suspiciously manicured designer types. Occasionally, the sad sight of a disconnected thirtysomething with lank hair and a kris holding up grubby fisherman's pants slid into view. They were usually gentle and very obliging types, clinging to the strands of their golden age. I got lucky: down an alley, I spotted chipped blue paint on concrete, the calling card of the dhaba. It was unlikely to be the real thing, but close enough. In a windowless window frame sat a man magicking up parathas like a sorcerer, and his one customer was a hard-skinned white man of about thirty with wispy dreads welded to his head. As I walked up to him, he turned and nodded coolly. "Haven't seen you here before," he commented.

"That's because I've just arrived." He nodded as the cook handed him a folded paratha. The solid smell of potato momentarily filled the air. "Looks good," I added.

"Yeah, it's the best one around mate," he replied in a thick Lancashire accent.

"I'd better get one then." I motioned with my eyes and held two fingers up to the cook, who shook his head in affirmation. "I need some fuel. I'm about to tackle the train station."

"Brave lad," my companion retorted while sloshing his potato snack around his mouth to let it cool.

"It has to be done. Anyway, it's probably the only time I'll have to plough through that nightmare."

"You might be lucky. There's a foreigner's only window," he informed me.

"Cool. I'll check it out."

"It's usually closed though," he added, as the first of my parathas was handed to me. I blew on it and bit into it, keeping my lips out of harm's way. "Gooooood," I whispered as I began to furnish my stomach.

"Where are you off to then?" my fellow snacker asked as he wiped his hands on some newspaper.

"Pathankot... first."

"And then to Dharamsala?" he enquired.

“No. Kashmir.” The cook’s timing was perfect. He handed me the second paratha as I placed a red note on the counter.

“I’ve heard it’s magic up there mate,” he replied. “Great smoke as well if you’re into that sort of thing.”

I smiled and nodded at him. “I don’t suppose there’s anything decent around here, is there?”

“Ah yeah, but the decent stuff’s a rip off.”

I raised my eyebrows while shovelling the last of the paratha into my greedy mouth. My eating companion produced some light-coloured hashish from a fold in his short-sleeved shirt and palmed it to me for perusal. It looked a bit airy, but clean. “This looks like Afghani, mate,” I guessed.

“I’m not sure what it is. I traded it with some Jordanian bloke in Manali. It’s not bad though. I’ll break you off some.”

“No,” I objected. “You don’t have much left. Any chance of scoring something around here? I’ll cash you up now, and we can work it out later.”

He sniffed and retrieved the lump of beige hashish from my hand, breaking off a thumbnail-sized nugget and returning it to me. “Don’t worry about the cash mate. Meet me here about nine. I’ll be here for a while. The name’s John.”

“That’s a nice name. I’m Luke.” I held out my hand and he shook it.

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I knew the right thing to do was to head straight to the train station, but I convinced myself that security would be tight and it would be better to drop off my bounty for peace of mind. I made a point of greeting the guesthouse manager soberly, not that he cared. He grumpily acknowledged me, seemingly more annoyed if you weren’t blatantly breaking the guesthouse rule sheet plastered on the inside of each room’s door than if smoke were billowing all around you.

Rooting around in the foot of my rucksack, I located a stray lighter. From my wallet, I fished out my black metal fake credit card holder, slid it open and removed the cancelled card. Pinching a shard from the lump John had given to me, I carefully placed it on an indentation in the centre of the card holder and brought the

partially opened end to my mouth. It was an unusual hit: not synthetic and not particularly strong, but it was smooth. And it was decent hash. I briefly considered saving some for later in case I didn't hook up with John, but I thought the better of it. By the time I had mowed through three small lumps, it seemed churlish not to finish the rest of it off.

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I hadn't registered anything until an urban nightmare in the form of a scrabbling horde swept by me as I walked towards the ticket hall. Quickening my step while still paying mental tribute to the real hippies who could expedite a score, I laughed at my ignorance. The queues were crazy deep; all of them. There were plenty of windows to buy tickets at, but the throng had bottlenecked into just one like debris being sucked into a vortex. I loitered around the fringes, realizing it was pointless attempting to figure out a system too intricate for my transitional brain, even if it were now in a heightened sense of awareness. Peeling off from the phalanx, I read the lettering on the glass partitions, trying to glean some information that may apply to clueless foreigners. Counting down the numbered glass fronts, I spotted the opening for Visitors and the Disabled. That was the first of many ultimate truths I would find in unlikely corners of India. Angling my head to try to catch a glimpse of a ticket clerk who might be crouching out of sight, I was disappointed. The largest employer in the world was short-staffed. I was secretly happy I could cash out the thirty minutes I'd allotted to queuing and turned on my heels. But before I could take a step, I heard the deep voice of a person who wanted to engage. "There is no point being here now," he said disparagingly.

I turned around to see a navy-blazered, pot-bellied man of about forty, shaking his head arrogantly while studiously avoiding my eyes. "So can I buy a ticket here?" I asked casually, hoping to induce a volley of opprobrium.

"This window is closed for the day. Where do you want to go?" he asked, continuously shaking his head like a disappointed parent.

"Patankhot, tomorrow."

“Best to come tomorrow morning to this window. Bring proof of money exchange if you want to pay in rupees.” I suddenly felt blearily baked, trying to make sense of his instructions. I was waiting for his final contemptuous glare and readying my eyes to laser through him, but he desisted, instead slowing the shake of his head to signify the natural end of our exchange. I smiled and settled on a random urban walk to help the hash shake free my jet lag.

Out of the station, I mapped the square I would walk in my mind. A right turn followed by a right turn followed by a right turn, and I would surely be back at the station. The first thing I noticed was a one-armed legless woman of about seventy being chastised by a high-pitched effeminate man of about thirty, who stopped briefly upon seeing a ghost-faced Aryan like me staring at him with my head to one side. I almost folded my arms up high and dropped a shoulder to freak him out, but he moved on, into a squalid camp of untouchables. The old woman looked at me with a mixture of relief and docile fear, instilling in me a sharp pang of guilt at the shit she would have to face when the chinless wonder returned on his rounds. I ambled away, trying to put the whole episode down to my cannabinoid receptors warming up.

After turning right again and walking for about fifteen minutes, I was as far away from the forced atmosphere of Paraganj as I could have imagined. I found myself traversing through a dusty, concrete jungle of half-built off-roads and shells of apartments. At first, I assumed these buildings were the vestiges of bankrupt construction projects, but a hollering mother from four storeys up alerted me to a cricket game taking place in the setting Sun on a dust patch below. The boys playing were no older than twelve but had unreal skills. With an uneven length of wood, they swatted a hard cricket ball at every conceivable angle, directing it behind trees, up the concrete walls of their homes and back out onto the street... even finessing cuts into an adjacent rubbish dump, where the smallest of the boys laid in wait, apparently serving his apprenticeship as a boundary retriever. I had little interest in cricket, but these kids were amazing and I stood there transfixed until one of them called me out. I refrained from embarrassing myself and headed on up the road to a scary looking roundabout: there were radials going in six directions, but none to the right. I lamented India's penchant for radials and took the rightest one available.

The road soon thinned out into an unlikely neighbourhood, disconnected from the organic flow of habitations I had passed through, and the locals looked at me differently. It wasn't paranoia, and it wasn't the standard warding off look I had eventually become accustomed to. This seemed to be a combination of opportunistic threat and disbelief at a foreigner actually being there live and direct. Even the women looked at me with a "What the fuck are you doing here?" expression. I brazened it out, but I wasn't silly enough to play the White Card and get all colonial with them. The eyes of men of various ages were letting me know that they knew that I knew I was marooned and at their mercy. Only when I'd made my way through the busiest part of the street, with dusk suddenly upon me, did some deeper realization dawn on me. They didn't think I was a foreigner, at least the few parting the way for me now. It was much worse: they had me pegged for a light-skinned upper caste absentee landlord. I was either untouchably safe or in danger of being lynched at any moment.

Arriving at a small street market leading to a traffic-filled road, I accepted that they probably didn't know what to think; a funny-looking random barrelling through their neighbourhood for no apparent reason as night was falling was probably the major news of the day. The only truths I could arrive at were that I was lost and it was dark. It was time to throw myself at the mercy of a rickshaw wallah.

Right on cue, at the edge of the market, a rusty grey auto-rickshaw pulled up in front of me and an obese woman arrogantly alighted, flicking her straggling sari over her shoulder while admonishing the driver for something or nothing, contemptuously shoving a ten-rupee note in his hand. He looked unlicensed and not too costly: he qualified. Gazing at me furtively from behind a grotty scarf wrapped around his face up to his eyes, he nodded upwards. "Paraganj," I requested. He held his hands out in a sign of not understanding. "Pah – rah – ganj," I repeated loudly. I could see he wanted the fare but didn't have a clue what I was saying. I could also see that I might very well be fucked if this man didn't start understanding me quickly; there was no sign of any other rickshaws in the vicinity. "Connaught Circussss, New Delhi side," I announced confidently.

He gave me that wonderful half-cocked head shake of acknowledgement. "One hundred rupees," he replied. I offered fifty even though I knew it was too much; I liked this man. "Seventy," he announced unsurely, holding up six fingers.

"Sixty," I confirmed mirroring the six fingers.

"New Delhi," he said setting off, stirring discomfort in me at how far I'd wandered.

I propped myself up against a protruding steel rod in the back of the rickshaw as the wallah hurtled impressively through the back streets of old Delhi, careering between cars and pedestrians, only slowing down for an occasional cow resting in the middle of the road. His consistent speed comforted me as I ran through the permutations of hitting smoke if Lancashire John didn't show up in the restaurant later. The driver kept on speeding through a myriad of manoeuvres, leaving me with only charcoal fumes and flashing faces for company... just the way I liked it. I was anticipating a dramatic turn onto a main road off Connaught Circus at any moment, but it didn't come. Timewise, this journey wasn't making sense, and the driver began to look back at me frantically.

"Here we go," I said beneath my breath. Yet, I still believed in this warrior, even more so as the scarf fell from his head to reveal a bony, bearded face with weathered but direct eyes. He stalled the engine, nodded to me and re-wrapped the scarf around his face up to his eyes before softly requesting directions from a butcher standing in front of his shop. I watched as between the two of them they attempted to calculate the best route. The driver seemed genuinely distraught while in my mind I selfishly clung to the terms of our contract. But before I could justify what was likely to play out, I knew I'd already been pre-informed of my wrongness. Then, a gruff-looking man approached and waved his arms about with assertiveness. The rotund shopkeeper noticed me watching their congress and shouted "road is closed that side, but there is possible short way this side."

We were away again, and the driver seemed somewhat relieved as he turned onto a viciously bumpy road barely qualifying as driveable. He didn't care; he was bizarrely cavalier about the prospect of riding his livelihood into submission. From time to time, he slowed to avoid cavernous potholes, navigating laterally across roads, zigging and zagging like a preternatural probe and

speeding up at any clear stretch, even if only ten yards in length. With a mighty heave, he bullied his rickshaw over a final stretch of broken asphalt before alighting on relatively smooth tarmac, speeding past a small gathering of shops and onwards through busier streets. His progress was only halted by a tell-tale traffic jam, and he performed miraculously to snake his way through countless vehicles until I saw Connaught Circus up ahead. I tapped gently on his shoulder and bounced an invisible ball with my palm facing the ground. "Sixty rupees," I announced guiltily as I peeled the notes from my roll.

"But sir," he began, pained yet not forced, the honour in his eyes more disappointed in going against himself than determined to catch me for more.

"We made a deal," I asserted.

"But gasoline cost and closed road." His voice tapered off.

Somehow, I was getting the better of him by initially letting him get the better of me. And still I knew he wasn't playing me, and if he were he deserved a much bigger payoff. I peeled off another twenty and handed it to him, unaware I wouldn't meet a man like him anywhere else in transit. "Only because I know you've got honour," I said, as he accepted the note. He swept the scarf around his face once more and bowed deeply, his blazing Shaivite eyes never leaving mine... not for even a moment. I backed away, smiling with a screwed up face. His face, I never forgot.

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Walking back towards Paraganj, I felt different somehow, neither sober nor stoned. As I watched the happy snappers taking photographs in front of any structure more than a few years old, I felt like I might be managing to get myself out of my own way, or at least had begun to. I plonked my ass down on a hard bench in the dhaba and ordered a thali, and judging from the eaters around me, it was going to be served prison-style in a shiny metallic tray. Within a minute, the waiter swirled by, placing my order in front of me with a bow. It was a solid looking thali: three different veg, a neatly folded naan bread and a portion of decent curd. I went to work, keeping an eye out for John. I was mopping up the dregs of the



crucial lentil soup when a man of about sixty at an adjacent table addressed me.

“My friend,” he began. I turned my head with one eye open and a tuft of naan bread hanging out of my mouth. “Enjoying your meal, sir?” I wasn’t sure if this was a question or an observation, but it usually signified an entry point to a hustle. Also, I was naturally caveman about being disturbed mid-dinner. He looked on, a curious mix of Fagin from *Oliver Twist* with a happy witch doctor. Everyone in Delhi was beginning to look like someone from the West with one comical difference... usually a snagged feature, different skin tone or impressive mane. He approached me as I scooped the portion of curd into my mouth in three greedy spoonfuls. “May I join you friend,” he asked.

“If you like,” I replied. “But my boyfriend is coming to meet me, and he gets jealous if he sees another man talking to me.”

“Ah, your male friend you mean?” he suggested.

“No. I mean my boyfriend.”

“What?” he hissed, curling his upper lip as a picture began to leak into his frontal lobe.

“Man love,” I whispered loudly while winking louchely. His game was crumbling badly before his own eyes. It was probably the first time he’d been taken down this social tributary, and he was listing badly. Still unable to commit, his attention was diverted by John bustling through the restaurant, and he looked desperately to him for a jump-off. “This old man was trying to seduce me,” I blurted.

“Nooooo,” he shouted indignantly.

“Are we still on?” I asked John, winking.

“Yeh,” he replied, catching his breath. “Do you wanna go somewhere else?”

“Yeh... back to my room.” I glanced at the old man, who was moronically following my conversation with John like an infant following a game of Pong.

“You are disgusting,” blared the sixty-year old, realizing he had struck out.

“If it was good enough for Shiva, it’s good enough for me,” I retorted, leaving him rooted. I paid the waiter at the door.

Once outside, some nondescript man waved to somebody I couldn't see and nodded towards me at the same time. "Having good dinner sir," he commented.

"Yeah." I turned to John and asked him if he'd eaten. He replied that he was about to fast.

"Wise choice," the man added, edging closer to the two of us. I gave half a head shake in agreement. "It is always wise to eat well. Good, simple food," he said softly. "Some people think they gain insight from a special place they have accessed through hardship or from dwelling in a dark place. They think others don't know this place," he added. I nodded in affirmation, sticking out my lower lip. "But food affects the brain," he continued. "Thus bad food hurts you for all time, leaves your foundations on the line. And that means the higher functions of your brain must be shakier. That is all." He turned and walked away, soon disappearing from view.

"That was interesting," remarked John. "I got you a *tola*."

"Cool. We can go up to my room and listen to some good music on a tinny sounding Walkman if you like."

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The sound was shitty. The ability of hash to make music sound better was being sorely tested. But it was nice to hear music without the background ruckus of Delhi, and the smoke wasn't bad. It wasn't good either, but for Delhi it was okay. I got busy on my credit card holder while John fired up a chillum. He offered it to me, and I obliged so as not to be rude despite the tobacco inside. "I'm trying to avoid tobacco," I announced after whipping four deep inhalations in a row through my lungs.

"I put as little in as possible," he replied generously.

"Yeh, I noticed. Would this burn okay with grass instead of tobacco?"

"Yes, but you'll struggle to get any decent grass around here, or any grass for that matter."

I considered the logistics for a moment before taking another four sharp hits and a long draw, deep into my lungs, passing the chillum back to John with a Shaivite acknowledgement. He proceeded to fill his boots, somewhat ceremoniously but not

affectedly, leaning back on to the edge of my bed in that cramped prison cell. But at least the ceiling was blue, and the minimalist house sounded kind of good when tinny. I was getting stoned, somewhere between the heavy chillum hit and the cleaner pure shots of neat hash.

I felt a hand clasped on my shin as I veered in and out of consciousness. John seemed to be motioning to leave, and I sat up in the bed. "I'll come down with you," I stated. "I've got to pick up some shit before the newsagent closes."

"You'd better hurry," he replied.

I bolted the door behind us and secured its flimsy lock. It reminded me why you should never leave cash in a hotel room in India. At least if you get mugged, you have chances; equity in the battle. There's nothing worse than having your destiny out of your own hands, no matter how shitty a path that destiny is taking you down. It was a dreary, tiled corridor that the two of us messily traversed, even if the turquoise ceiling panels added an unlikely touch of aesthetics to the grim pokiness of the surroundings. The manager gave us a lazily threatening stare as we passed... as if he were positioning himself to declare knowledge of our transgressions. I returned the stare, messaging him that not long had passed since most people were mainlining in this grimy guesthouse.

Outside, the bustle was waning. Beggars felt safe in urinating on the main street, barely concealed by corrugated steel rubbish bins, with most of the shops' shutters down for the night. Wafts of charcoal drifted by, with mosquitoes in tow, as a city worker moved rubble from one side of the street to the other. Paraganj was closing down for the night, and it had only just gone eleven. "It's not looking good for an open shop," I remarked.

John pointed to what looked like a lit house-front. "He has a little shop attached to his restaurant. He will sort you out."

"Nice one. Do you need anything?"

"No," he replied. "I'm going back. You're going to head off tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah, up to the high mountains before it gets too cold. What about yourself?"

"I'm thinking of Himachal."

"I'll be there in a couple of weeks," I informed him.

“Manali?”

“Maybe for a day or two. Going to check out the Parvati valley.”

“Well then I might see you there?” I smiled and held my hand up. “Thanks for sorting me out, man.” He smiled back and bowed slightly.

I glanced over my shoulder just in time to see his wiry frame sliding out of view. Heading towards the light, I realized I’d gotten lucky. You can end up, and I have, ploughing through hundreds of tourists in India before hitting one who has a clue about the lay of the land. Most just spend their time announcing to others wearily about how everything’s changed but that they know one connection, one porthole to the way it used to be.

I requested skins and water from the boss man, and he begrudgingly turned the lights on in his restaurant annex that served as a mini general store. “Cold water please boss,” I added as he reached for a lukewarm shelved bottle. As he opened the refrigerator, I saw a bar of chocolate inside. This man was way ahead of the curve in a market where chocolate usually came infuriatingly warm. “Chocolate as well, sir.” All of a sudden his mood changed as he calculated a decent score for late in the day. While he groped around for a calculator, I stood back a few steps to catch a glimpse of the adjacent eatery. A lone, scruffy looking local looked at me as a table of dippy English trustafarians commented on the live news report spewing from the television. I stepped back towards the boss man and paid him for the provisions. As I turned around, the scruffy Indian was there. I couldn’t tell what his angle was. He seemed disconnected from everything around. Before I could brush past him, he opened up.

“Did you see that news report?” he asked. I told him I didn’t listen to the news as I found it unsatisfactory. “You are wise,” he continued. “Even when people don’t trust what they are watching, or look back at old news where our leaders and media promised something, they think they can laugh knowingly.”

“Yeah maybe,” I replied agreeably. His features were as loud as his words, and both felt strangely welcome.

“But part of you still buys into what you’re seeing in real time,” he added. “Live and exclusive as they say... on the ground lies.”

“Sounds about right,” I admitted and bade him farewell. As I walked back to my room, it was as if that media assassin had prodded something awake in me, something which had been with me since I had arrived but I’d yet to acknowledge. More likely, it had always been with me, but I’d only pre-consciously become aware of it since I arrived in India. And now I was consciously aware of it. The thing regulated where I looked, which angles I took or saw. It seemed to be my friend, almost a guide, but it was shadowing me. And that in itself felt ominous. I hadn’t made up my mind whether I could see it in others’ behaviour or whether it was only in me. And as much as I wanted it with me, I knew it could spell trouble if I let it get into the driver’s seat.

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## ***CHAPTER FIVE***



Landell spotted a train pulling up at another platform and considered whether it was worth battling through rampaging snack vendors to check out if it was his ride. He had spent the previous four hours scuttling between platforms on promises his train was about to arrive, each time traipsing back to a blackboard in the arrivals hall to see the latest alterations being etched in white chalk onto a timetable. The melting smell of the station's fittings intermingled with nasal screeches coming from the platforms as he forced himself through the motions one more time, using his height to catch a glimpse of the name on the side of the train. A clerkish Hindu attempting to take his ground slowed before averting his eyes frantically at the sight of a Western man shuttling alongside him. "Where does train go?" Landell blurted.

"This is Pune train, sir," replied the man, relieved his edge-taking had gone unmentioned.

Panic, indignation and revenge seeped through Landell as the train hissed, threatening to depart before he could navigate the stairs connecting platforms. The local wide boys simply dropped themselves onto the tracks, scurried across the danger zone and entered the train through steel doors flapping slowly with dying momentum. Still unsure of his next move, Landell spotted the blue-blazer beacon of an inspector at the foot of the overhead stairs, peeling reams of paper back and forth, aggressively answering the queries of paranoid passengers. He barged into the melee, demanding confirmation of the Pune train's whereabouts while admonishing the blue blazer on the false information he'd been peddling for the previous hour. "Show me your ticket sir," demanded the imperious inspector.

"Don't worry: I've got a ticket. I'm supposed to check for my name on some sheet, but it's not up on the notice board," responded Landell.

"I am having the sheets here. And some are posted on train doors for your information."

"Some?" Landell inhaled, expanding his chest.

"Please to be showing your ticket sir, and I will direct you." The fat-faced inspector was brimming with bureaucratic pride, making Landell want to blow him off. But he begrudgingly handed over his ticket and waited rebelliously for instructions. "S2 car, end of platform," revealed the inspector as Landell stared at his lunch-stained nylon shirt.

Angling down the platform, Landell's attention was grabbed by a vendor selling some strange oil puff pastry snack smothered in potato curry, which looked horrific but smelled divine to a tourist six hours past a breakfast of two bananas and a bar of chocolate. At the exact moment its potential registered, the train shunted forward about fifteen metres, panicking the waiting passengers into jumping aboard. It was a clumsy combination of a circus act and racing for your life. Landell cursed the timing, wondering where he was going to be able to find food that wouldn't bring on brutal runs in the dead of night. He felt a sudden debilitating pain in the base of his stomach, a pain unlike anything he'd felt before... a kind of premonition. Awkwardly, he looked for a footing on a metal step to the train; he'd locate his seat later. But moustachioed men insisted on blocking his way in order to maintain their self-appointed lookout positions. Welding his hand to a heavy steel door handle, Landell was going for one violent thrust to jump aboard, happily willing to down anyone in his path, when the train shuddered to a halt. One foot dragged comically along the platform as he wedged himself to the stationary train, his face resting against the remnants of the passenger sheet taped to the coach door. Men, women and children brushed by him to get down onto the platform again. Landell stumbled inside, consoling himself he'd only have to take such a loss once that day.

Logging each seat number with rapidly waning focus, Landell was still harbouring fantasies of lounging for the rest of

the day, and possibly even stretching out in his sleeper berth, when his airborne calculations ground to a halt as the train began to trundle away from the platform. He double-checked his seat number: forty-six. Squinting at the metal numbers screwed into the corners of the partitions, he checked his ticket once more and felt the heat rising. A family of three was glued to his berth, with the spots either side occupied by snoring octogenarians. Looking up to check his sleeping berth, a moustachioed man lying there turned his body to face the partition delineating stalls. Tracing his eyes back down, the man of the family occupying Landell's seat gruffly demanded to see his ticket. Landell ignored him, cross-checked his seat number against the coach number one more time, motioning the man away from the area with his finger. The usurper shuffled his wife and child a few inches towards one of the snoring old men, creating enough space for a leg. "Up now," shouted Landell.

"It's no problem sir. We are all sharing here." The man smiled while rocking his head from side to side.

"No, you're carving up the seat I reserved. So please leave now." The man shook his head dismissively, bringing the digits of his right hand together in a bunch before opening them suddenly in a dismissive action as if digitally flinging his way to a moral highground. Landell, blood rising, sheepishly retreated and began searching for the ticket inspector, walking the length of the train without locating him, whimsically considering throwing his ticket out a window in order to induce an instant appearance. When he returned, the family of three were triumphantly occupying his seat, going so far as to lay a food cloth on it as they crouched on the floor to have an early dinner. Landell's stomach began to taunt him, mocking his supine resistance and causing his brain to circuit like that of a tortured outcast. Spinning around, he lurched towards the end of the coach to access some fresh air, and there was the ticket inspector, quizzically appraising another weird Westerner's emotional state. "Here," blurted Landell, jabbing the ticket into the inspector's chest. "There's a family in my seat, and they



won't leave. Tell me: what's the point of having a ticket on this train?"

"You must have a ticket sir," announced the inspector diligently.

"Tell that to the prick in my seat."

"Why so angry, sir?"

Landell sucked air through his teeth, turning his nose away from a nearby toilet's streaming tentacles. "I want my seat now."

The inspector smiled obliviously as one of his colleagues entered the carriage. "Go take your seat then, sir."

Landell moved his face within centimetres of the inspector's. "Get him out of my seat now, or I'll throw his whole family off the fucking train."

"Sir, that is not allowed."

"Nowww," screamed Landell.

Steaming from a safe distance as the inspector and his assistant ploughed through fifteen minutes of negotiations that culminated in raised voices, hysterics from the mother and eventual intervention from an army officer, who darted a bizarre conspiratorial look his way, Landell was ready to quit. As the railway employees ushered the family of three out of the compartment and towards another carriage, he realized he was mentally fried two days into this endurance test. "You bad man," bleated the woman on her way past. Landell lowered his eyes and made his way to his seat, squeamishly accepting its warmth as he sat down.

"But sir," implored the self-congratulatory army officer, who'd been busy bossing the compartment across from the one the family had leaked into. "That man has a family."

"What? I'm supposed to let him run all over me because he and his wife can't count to twenty-eight. Is that it?"

"Acha," replied the military man, as he pulled down the sleeves of his sweater with the fading Sun. Landell slumped in his seat, eyes closed, and promised himself that things would be better when he got to Goa. Moments later, a strange feeling of

being stared at overcame him, that age-old sense still intact in most people but not usually accessible with eyes closed. Lifting his lids slowly, he saw three people on the bench seat facing him staring intently. Switching his line of vision towards the window, an old snorer had awoken and was examining Landell's face like an explorer charting maps of a rumoured landmass. In another direction was the adjacent compartment, with about eight punters, including the army officer, glued to Landell's every move. Squirming, he opted for closing his eyes again.

A random voice cut across the silence. "You are coming from?" Landell ignored the question, relying on a long-held belief that the best way to deal with problems was to ignore them.

"Sir, you are coming from," bellowed the army officer. Landell's attempts at feigning a fade into sleep were not being bought. Still, most of the spectators wouldn't take the lead. Only the military man, and occasionally a fiftyish narky civil servant type who had a deluded sense of his toughness correlating to his social position, would demand answers of the outsider. Landell naively assumed they would grow bored after a few minutes and began to cultivate his mental exit strategy: a secret beach in Goa, with a bar that seemed to exist only for him and some random cool people who happened by once every few days.

Just as he was beginning to genuinely drift, the civil servant jabbed his knee. "You will have to introduce yourself," he ordered.

Tapping into the reservoir of reptilian rage that hadn't yet subsided from trying to gain control over his seat, Landell snapped. "You ever touch me again, and I'll fuck you up. Do you understand?" he bellowed, leaning over to his assailant and jabbing his chest with a middle finger. As defensive hollers swirled around the compartment, Landell was on the verge of being overcome with guilt when he copped the expression on the civil servant's face: the entire façade of his life was sliding off his chin. Remorse turned to pity at the thought of hordes of

*babus* sneering at the waning authority of a boss with nothing else to hold onto.

The sergeant stepped into the fray, dredging up an almost forgotten strategy to deal with people out of his jurisdiction.

"Let us not fight," he requested cagily. "It is a long journey, brother." He looked at Landell disarmingly. "If the man doesn't want to speak, leave him alone."

"Thanks," replied Landell, overstating his sarcasm, while the sergeant assuaged the civil servant, who was now scrabbling to pick up some crumbs of pride off the floor.

"You are from England, correct," stated the sergeant. Landell nodded. The onlookers murmured, asked questions among each other and began to disagree comically.

"England was in our country for a very long time," remarked a squat sebaceous man of about forty who still looked like he had his clothes arranged by his mother.

"Yeah, sorry about that."

"Why doesn't England be ruling the world anymore?" asked another.

"Lots of reasons."

"And your queen is a good woman," quizzed another

"She's okay, but she's not my queen," replied Landell.

"Yes, she is your Christian queen," claimed another. The statement of this fact felt strangely disconcerting to Landell.

"England did a lot of good things for India," asserted the military man, sliding Landell into an untroubled supporting position, like every smart alpha does to a potential loose cannon.

"Maybe, but those days are over. India will be fine," stated Landell.

"Acha," chimed a few of the observers. The civil servant sat in a glum stupor, dismayed at a perceived group treachery he was impotent to address.

"Where is your wife?" Landell couldn't pinpoint the questioner, but the voice came from one of the men sitting behind the sergeant.

"I'm not married," replied Landell, bracing himself for an onslaught.

"Why not?"

"Are you coming to India to locate wife?"

"What is problem?"

"You must have wife."

Landell smiled and fished in his shirt pocket for a cigarette. Placing it in his mouth, he kept on smiling as he excused himself with his eyebrows and pushed by a sea of legs en route to the end of the carriage. Turning towards the door, he saw it was wide open with a young man lolling his head out to catch the wind. Easing back to the centre of the walkway where carriages meet, Landell came back into view of his inquisitors.

"Can you eat rice," boomed another question.

"Why is the West believing in Jewish religion?"

"Can I have your address in London town?"

"Have you met the queen?"

Landell once again slid out of sight, holding a cigarette up to alert the door hogger that he was about to blow smoke in his direction. The bearded man, about thirty-five and bookishly skinny, let his head rest to one side like a canine manipulator. "Cigarette, brother," he requested.

"Sure. Here you go." Landell held out the red and gold packet and watched the man carefully extract one. "Let me stand there please. I need to see the sunset."

"Acha." Landell arched his head around the steel door as the train whizzed past an empty platform at Lilod, the carefully painted yellow and black station sign revealing itself like an insect against a tangerine backdrop. The Sun had disappeared, and the dusk cloud formations left a softly addictive skyline. "It is the light," asserted the bearded man as he blew smoke past Landell's face and out into the Rajasthani wilderness.

"Pardon."

"There is something about the light at this time that is very important."

"It's a beautiful sunset," confirmed Landell, overcoming his greed and leaving space for the man to partake in the view.

"No, you watch," replied the man, more concerned with extracting full value from his cigarette than viewing the sky's citrus transformation.

"You're missing some beautiful colours," asserted Landell.

"Yes, the colours are of beauty, but it's the light that you should always see. In any place at this time of day, the light will aid you. It will help you overcome a bad day, enhance a good one or retain an energy you were lucky to receive at some point." Landell nodded and offered his acquaintance another cigarette. "No thank you, brother. One is enough."

"Are you sure?"

The bearded man made that motion with his head between nodding and shaking that was still confusing Landell, smiling all the while. "Whatever misfortune you are having, always try to be outside during that light." The man half shook his head one more time and retreated into the carriage.

Landell continued watching as the sky began to turn a violent purple shade and the first insects of the night hurled their bodies into the carriage any time the train slowed. For two hours, he remained jammed against the door as the *Pune Express* wended its way through the Rajasthani countryside, stopping long enough at a couple of minor stations for skeins of enterprising locals to hop aboard and sell everything from nuts and biscuits to magazines and leather belts. Landell chomped lazily on plain flour snacks, managing to snag a couple of samosas from a vendor who mysteriously appeared from inside the carriage even though the train hadn't stopped for nearly an hour. How would he get back to wherever back was? Landell felt at sea trying to understand an unfathomable chain of events that constituted an average day on an Indian train.

As he stepped over bags and dinner trays on his way back to his seat, Landell noticed the happily snoozing shape of the army sergeant sprawled out on the lower berth of a three-tiered sleeping compartment. His immediate neighbours were busy

fastening the middle berth to its metal support chains, worryingly nodding as Landell appeared. He nodded, relieved at the prospect of an early night; serving as the back rest for the day seat, the middle berth holder was always at the mercy of the other two sleepers, who may or may not want to retire early. Landell charted the grainy meal of the wheat flour biscuits he'd consumed as they made their way through his stomach, leaving him short on nutrition. Within minutes, he was flat on his back, squeezing thoughts of hopelessness out of his ill-nourished mind, determined to glean what is promised from an obligatory jaunt around Hindustan.

The steady grinding motion of the train began to override Landell's consciousness amid the rustling of restive natives and snoring local leaders. Within a few thoughts, he was focusing only on the piston-churning sound of steel on steel. It was only when the train slowed approaching a station did he realize that he'd been drifting, but for how long he couldn't figure out. Only a few stray voices could be heard outside, and the train pulled out of the rural station within a few minutes. He settled down again, turning on to his side and trying to not let the grimy plastic cover of his berth touch his face.

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Landell was standing in Sinclair's office, with his agent triumphantly reading comments from Guardian readers about the first extracts of his sophomore novel to appear in a literary supplement. Sinclair was talking big, belittling Landell's nemesis while reeling off huge numbers, suggesting Hollywood was already putting feelers out. "So, I'll be getting a six-figure advance then," predicted Landell.

"Well, I'm batting for a big score," replied Sinclair. "But I'm more concerned about the total package. I want to secure your future."

"If they're looking for a three-book deal, I want mid six figures." Landell saw himself standing above Sinclair's desk while correcting the position of his sunglasses.

"Don't worry; I'll get that. But if you would just agree to this ghost writing project, it would make your negotiating position a lot stronger."

"You want me to whore myself for some blow-in publishing house. Is that what you're telling me?"

"Landell... please. I want us to build a foundation. And there's nothing wrong with making money from writing for someone else. You're a writer, so be a writer." Sinclair stood up and walked around his desk, tentatively reaching his hand towards his writer's shoulder, which quickly turned away.

"Yeah, but I'm not some behind-the-bus-station twenty-quid hooker. I'm a high-class word ho... executive style. So, I'll be needing major dough."

"Chai chai chai chai chai chai chai chai chai chai chai." The squealing voice like a fire alarm woke Landell with a jolt. He felt the train come to a cartoonish halt as an early-morning vendor pressed a tray of teas up against the metal bars enclosing the window below his head. Trying to collect his thoughts as sparse morning sunrays crept through the partially opened window, Landell's initial inclination to snap at the tea-seller turned to self-preservation when he sat up and saw the scene outside the train: water boys, chai wallahs, snack sellers, mangy dogs and a couple of fretful goats flashed in and out of his line of vision.

"It is breakfast time," announced the passenger who had slept on the bunk beneath him. He was standing by the window, smiling with the familiarity a night shared sleeping in close proximity had lent him.

"Yeah," replied Landell. "Do you know where we are?"

"We have arrived at Kaharakwasla side. Next major stop is Pune." The man's broad smile checked Landell for a moment.

"What time do you think we will get to Miraj?"

The man shook his head furiously while tucking his shirt into his freshly donned lungi. He popped a handful of nuts into his mouth and began to chew. "This train terminates at Pune. You will need to change there for Miraj."

"No," insisted Landell. "I have a ticket to Miraj."

"That is possible my friend, but this train is not going there. Show me your ticket please." Landell shook his head and held his hands up in submission. "I assume you are visiting Pune for meditation in the world-famous ashram," continued the man, holding out his nut-filled hand to Landell, who reflexively shook his head.

"No. I need to..."

"Well you should. It is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to improve your spirit. That is what you need if I may be so presumptuous."

"I'm sure you're right, but I have to be in Goa in a few days."

"Sir, you should always put your soul first, no?" Landell helped his morning guru collapse the berths back into position, all the while wondering if his chipmunk cheeks were natural or due to a lifetime of chewing nuts, before sitting down by the window to check the view as the train pulled out of the station.

"Sir," continued his guide, tapping Landell on the forearm. "I can see you are a man of intellect. I wouldn't dream of recommending one of those sex ashrams to you, but if you are interested I can introduce you to a place of pure meditation, just a few miles outside of Pune... lakeside. I will take you myself; no commission of course. It would be my privilege."

"That's very kind of you, but I..."

"You can come and see. If you don't like, I will arrange for you to catch evening train to Miraj... no problem."

"Is it your ashram?"

"No, no." The man laughed. "But my brother visits there from time to time, for replenishment. You will like. I can assure you."



Landell followed the lead of his Indian guide, who had introduced himself as Rajna, through a small wooden gate and past the side of a concrete structure painted pink. Behind the building, a coarse yellow field stretched off into the distance, gently running into a sizeable lake by way of a small area of marshy flats. A couple of miles away, on the far side of the lake, Landell could just about make out an industrial chimney belching smoke into the morning sky. "This way friend," directed Rajna, pointing his pupil to what looked like an oversized storehouse. Landell followed him through a swing door with three Sanskrit symbols etched into its upper panel. Inside, a short hallway opened into a spacious rectangular room. At least thirty people were sitting cross-legged on rattan mats, listening gleefully to a story from a long-limbed grey-haired man of about seventy perched on a small dais towards the end of the room. Rajna nodded towards the speaker while motioning for Landell to sit on an unoccupied mat. The old man, feeding his hair behind his ears with his fingertips, lifted his head slightly without losing any of his poise and continued with his address.

"So, my brothers and sisters, it may seem difficult to be living with honour while working for a company in the Western world, but in fact, it is most simple thing in the world to do..." The guru paused for a few seconds. "If your intention is clear and pure." Landell noted how the congregation swayed simultaneously and nodded with an undercurrent of willingness. "And how to make your intention pure," continued the speaker. "Simple: It has always been pure." He laughed, rocking back and forth, summoning his audience with his eyebrows to share in his revelation.

A bulky, Germanic-looking man in his late thirties turned to face Landell from about ten feet away and smiled broadly, coercing the newcomer to awkwardly reciprocate. "So simply let your purity win out and return to ease," concluded the speaker. "Move away from your current lack of ease or dis-ease," he

commanded, stressing the 'dis.' "And choosing to remove the influences from your life that cause disease will..." Landell's attention was jolted by the pause, the event of a guru forgetting his lines, but the entire congregation remained transfixed on the vision of a broad-shouldered seventy-year-old rocking back and forth as if temporarily slipping into another zone to retrieve the appropriate words for his voracious listeners. "Open the light," he exclaimed.

Landell began to feel a stream of rising jealousy shoot towards his neck. This guru even had his erstwhile doubters rowing along serenely beside the chiselled galley oarsmen. His words were fading in and out, but that seemed natural to Landell, who was locked onto the guru's labial movements. "So, brothers and sisters. If you do not like a company's policy, do not seek employment with that company. If you do not like a company's products, boycott those goods. And if your country's companies are all contemptible, then move somewhere else. Come to Indiaaaa." The patrons erupted into a low chatter, turning and smiling to one another, sharing and supporting their recognition.

"That's all for now," whispered Rajna, tapping Landell's knee. "So, you like?" he asked tentatively.

"Yeh, it was very good. You still haven't told me the guru's name."

"Zaila Dipta. But it is okay to call him Zaila."

"Zaila... interesting name," proclaimed Landell. "Do I get to meet him?"

"Now is not a good time. He usually meditates after morning *nirdeza*."

"Nirdeza?"

"This instruction. Unfortunately, we only captured the end, but I think you'll agree it was a most auspicious ending. Come, and I will introduce you to some of the members. They are your people."

“Sounds good.” Landell felt himself moving automatically for the first time since leaving London. He was grateful at the arrival of a recognizable hunger pang.

“They usually discuss the nirdeza before lunch. I’m sure you will find it most illuminating. I must leave you now and join Zaila for my morning meditation.” Landell watched Rajna stride officiously towards the dais, where Zaila was slowly straightening his back and moving towards a small door at the end of his platform. The thirty or so members of the congregation seemed to suddenly split into two distinct groups: one consisting of five people, including one attractive blonde woman of about twenty-five; and the remainder mostly consisting of permanently smiling men.

“Hey,” greeted a stoutish man in his late thirties. His blonde, curly hair was greying at the sides, blending nicely with a fresh, jowly face.

“Hello,” replied Landell.

“I am Frank. I am Dutch... oops, where I’m from isn’t supposed to matter.” The burly man smiled easily with a soft hand held out.

“It’s where you’re at that matters, right?”

“Yah, that is it.” Frank smiled. “Come on. I will introduce you to some of the others. Don’t tell them I told you where I was from, or I’m in big trouble.”

Landell was led from brother to brother and the occasional sister, all of whom greeted him with intense smiles and airy detachment. Most of the men asked him what he thought of Zaila’s instruction, which he excused himself from commenting on due to his late arrival. A few suggested asking questions, assuring him that he was welcome whether he wanted to engage or not. Landell felt ashamed of his instinct to carry out a swift census to get a snapshot of the nationality breakdown. When he was finally introduced to a dark-eyed woman in her twenties, he attempted to slip in through the side door. “You really remind me of a French friend of mine. Of

course, I know these labels aren't important, but you could be her sister."

"It's not possible," she replied in a clipped tone. "But I suppose I understand as I am from many places."

"Yes," replied Landell.

"Yes, I have a very old connection with India. That is why I'm here."

"Anywhere else?"

"Well, Crete as well. Also, I have lines going back to South America, pre-Columban."

"Are you from Israel?"

"Why do you say like that?"

Landell moved away slightly, animalistically creating some distance. "I'm very interested in accents and ethnic origins. I'm sorry; it's a bad habit."

"Well, because of this evil system we are all subjected to, I must carry a passport, but it will expire soon and I won't renew it. India is my home now."

Landell smiled and moved on to a bespectacled, frail, Nordic-looking boyish man in his twenties. "Did you have a problem with sister Aylah?" the man asked. Landell shook his head unable to frame a response. "She's a bit sensitive about things. It's difficult sometimes to express the different flows we receive from various parts of the world. Some of us believe these come from our ancestors, wherever they hailed from. Others think they are from some philosophy or way, however old that may be."

"You speak excellent English," replied Landell.

"Thank you. It's all I speak these days, apart from the little bit of Sanskrit I've learned, but that's very basic."

"Well, your English is really good. You're from Sweden, right?"

"Norway. My name is Mike."

"Not Brother Mike?" joked Landell.

"Whichever you like. And your name?"

"Landell. Can I ask you a question? It's cool if you don't want to answer."

"Sure Landell." Mike looked uneasy, demurring in a manner that suggested a few more wrong turns would be the end of the road in his current abode. He replaced his glasses further up his nose and assumed a pleasant expression.

"Where are all the people here from? I mean, I'm not asking you to tell me each person's home country, just a rough guide to how many people are from which countries. It's just everybody looks kind of European."

"Most are German; a few French; and there's a Canadian. A couple of Spanish, and one or two Israelis. I'm not sure after that. Why... are you a reporter?"

Landell laughed, realizing that's probably where he was heading. "No. It's just good to have people from different countries coming together. I suppose I was seeing how pure this place must be to break through barriers of nationality."

"Ye, these barriers are pointless anyway."

"You're probably right. Anyway, it was nice meeting you Mike. Take care."

"Will you be staying with us?" Landell was already walking away when he heard the question. He turned and shrugged, bumping into Frank in the process.

"Ah... my friend. Are you meeting people?"

"Landell's my name, Frank. And yeah, I'm meeting some people, but why is that small group out on its own?" Landell pointed towards the group of five.

"Ah, I don't know, but it's been like that for a few days. They are probably discussing some particular element of Zaila's teaching." Landell nodded and edged within earshot of the group, for the first time noticing the barrier created by the clothes he was wearing. He still smelled of train seats. The men were all wearing light cotton loose leggings and long-sleeved linen t-shirts. A sea of white and fawn ripples was only disturbed by the woman, who donned a long, one-piece covering which resembled an early twentieth-century nightgown. At first,

Landell could only catch tantalising fragments of the conversation among the five. It wasn't that the content was anything surprising, but there was an undercurrent of sorts, almost a subterfuge. It was as if their ashram speak contained a code or portent to a future event. Incomplete sentences and stressed fragments eventually allowed him to piece together a common theme that linked the different voices within the group.

"The form resonates in me, but I'd never seen it before. I'm almost sure," declared a tall, wiry man who Landell had assigned as Swiss on the account he sounded like a German with swagger.

"I'd seen the Shiva bull before, but there was no possible way," asserted a black-haired, light-skinned Spaniard.

"It was created by Nubians, exactly as I saw it, but I never knew who..." exclaimed the attractive blonde in a Home Counties accent.

Landell spent the subsequent hour circling the floor, exchanging observations about the implications of Zaila's morning address while all the time trying to remain within hearing distance of the group of five. Utterances of symbols, engravings and monuments erected by almost-forgotten cultures peppered their discussion. They each could account for at least two images that resonated in them from sources they could not have known until dependently verifying them with fellow searchers.

Landell fleetingly thought about the commitment to foster delusions instead of tracing the independent experience of paths that had been traversed for thousands of years before ancient peoples began honouring them. He wondered if these paths had created the history and its symbols or if the history created them. But that was as far as he could go... to that familiar place where he always became stuck. He imagined older paths trailing off into the distance but was unable to crystallize the concept of going back to source. Just like it was necessary for him to be plunged into the madness of his surroundings

before he could be shot forward, so too was it imperative not to stop at some soulfully attractive outpost at the expense of going all the way back, even if you could fool yourself that these spots were more than mere refilling stations, that they were places you could never have assimilated while you had your guard down sprawled on a sofa in front of a television.

Landell had drifted towards a closed door at the side of the ashram. It appeared to be an exit but had stayed shut during his time there. The pull of the outside was strong, but the thought of struggling to open the door while the brothers and sisters looked on in horror at such a grave insult flashed through him. Tracing his eyes across the wall, he spotted another door. The gang of five were beginning to edge towards it as the main phalanx of devotees moved towards the dais and positioned some mats and plates in a semi-circle. Landell was engrossed, grasping for a way to casually engage with the five without anybody else noticing, when Rajna emerged from a small door behind the dais. He saw Landell isolated and skipped over to him, overtly concerned. "Brother, are you okay?" Rajna asked, nervously kneading his moustache.

"Yeh, I'm fine... just want to get some eh fresh air."

"Yes, that is fine, but did you not meet your fellow devotees?"

"Yeah, yeah. I met most of them. I just walked over here as you came out."

"Acha. Well, we will have a light lunch soon, so yes, take some fresh air."

"Okay," replied Landell agreeably. "Will Zaila Dipta be emm heading proceedings, I mean." Landell realised his filter needed dusting.

"No. He is fasting today. He is deep in meditation now."

"Ahh... of course."

Outside, Landell looked out onto the lake and let his eyes run in panorama back towards the built-up area of a small village spilling down towards the grasslands adjacent to him. He tried to imagine a pre-industrial age, the time before the East India

Company had made its presence felt. Allowing his eyes to move over the natural contours, he attempted to glean something that would have led to an ashram being located there; something non-practical. As his eyes came back to the gravel beneath his feet, he turned and looked at the side of the building. It was plain concrete, only broken by two small doors and a steel frame at the far end of the building. Strolling towards the steel breach, Landell fantasized about finding a portal into the source of the ashram, but all he discovered was a broken fitting. Stepping back he noticed the concrete around the area had been filled, not recently but certainly after the initial construction. Placing an ear up to the smooth surface, he heard the unmistakeable din of a television drama cut short by a buzzing sound and then a snippet of cricket commentary before the dramatic dialogue resumed.

The sound of feet shuffling onto gravel pulled Landell away. Weakly kicking the ground like a rumbled child, he raised his eyes to see the group of five filing outside from the door at the far side of the ashram; they hadn't spotted him. Landell walked towards them, conscious of his crumpled pants and dusty light shirt clashing sinfully with their washed cotton get-ups. He smiled selfishly at the absurdity of the chasm between uniforms so close in texture. As he got closer, all five members of the group turned in unison, smiling and holding their palms together. "Namaste," they greeted.

Landell's belief that somehow the group would be willing to speak openly hadn't yet caught up with his awareness that their motions were rankly suspicious. "Namaste," he replied, smiling.

"So you just arrived at the ashram today?" asked the attractive blonde.

"Yeh," replied Landell, trying to suppress thoughts of which of her four brothers was trying to bang her and what story was being put on her to facilitate that. It seemed ridiculous that all four were running the same weary, traversing-a-common-spiritual-path routine that would culminate in a life bond borne



out of simultaneous enlightenment that in turn could be parlayed into a deceptively standard fuck, but he couldn't see any other technique they would possess. She was ripe for a coarse womaniser, probably in the guise of an ashram boss.

"So, will you be staying here for long," asked a well-built French man stiffly.

"About two or three hours," replied Landell smiling. "I just dropped by with Rajna."

"Oh, we thought you were a new brother," responded the woman, looking around to her four attendants.

"No, just passing through. Your eh... leader seems like a wise man, but I need to be in Goa in a couple of days." Landell paused and looked out towards the lake. "It's a nice spot though. How long have you guys been here?"

"He is much more than a wise man," declared a Germanic voice. Landell was unable to distinguish between the male members of the group, bar the French brother, who couldn't bring himself to keep the same affected distance from the blonde that the others maintained. Landell wasn't going to try to work out who was who.

"So, how long have you been here then?" repeated Landell.

"A few months, but we are leaving next week," declared the woman openly. Landell noticed the uncomfortable shuffling of the men, responding to her indiscretion. At once, they wanted nobody to know their business while weakening under the weight of needing to declare their ascension.

"Going back to Europe?" asked Landell. "Be careful nobody drags you to one of those churches." The woman laughed awkwardly and then levelled herself into assuming a placid tone.

"Western religions are so lost," she declared. "I try not to let their sadness infiltrate my thoughts, but it's been a long time since they were relevant."

"Yeah," replied Landell with creeping fear.

“We are going south to a more secluded retreat,” added the woman, stroking her hair and looking at the other members of the group. They all nodded together.

“So you’re not going to tell me where,” teased Landell.

“You wouldn’t know it,” asserted the Frenchman. “It’s only reached by boat... in the backwaters.”

“Sounds nice; should be peaceful.”

“We are not going there to find peace,” retorted a Germanic voice. “That we have. There is a different way there. Zaila is a great guru, but another master is there, and there is a way, and that way is our way.”

“Many people there?” asked Landell logistically.

“That’s not relevant,” replied the Frenchman. “Nobody speaks.”

“Not even the guru?”

“He hasn’t spoken for twenty years,” replied the woman, her eyes out of focus.

Landell trailed behind as the group re-entered the building. A communal lunch had been laid out on the dais: rice, dhal, aubergine, potatoes, pickled peppers and curd all formed a pretty circle of plates. Rajna was sitting at the edge of the dais with a light-skinned big-eyed bald man with impressively strong features. The brothers and sisters sat mostly in circles of four or five. Some sat alone, rocking gently and beaming in supplication at their good fortune. The group of five sat slightly to the side of the dais, behind and away from the others. Their heads appeared to be bobbing over the vanguard of Rajna, the bald Indian and the plates of food.

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## CHAPTER SIX



I hadn't come any closer to making my mind up as the Pathankot Express mail train hurtled towards Ambala, a most lyrical sounding of places, which I would later discover served as a portal to a comedically nightmarish death scene. The great thing about Pathankot was it was a transit point to both the Himalaya and the Karakoram Range, as well as to Punjab proper and Pakistan if you were feeling hardcore. But no plan would crystallize in my mind, not that that was what I wanted; but I suppose the weak, clingy, orderly side of my Western mindrack needed at least a framework I could pin my fantasies to.

I levered my rigid ass off the metal grate of a seat I had stupidly reserved for an extra forty rupees, happily relinquishing it to a withered grandmother who had had her eye on it since the train rolled out of Delhi. As I pointed her towards the seat, a supercilious bubble-faced Hindu man tried to commandeer it, kneeling me into a metal stanchion in the process while threatening the absurdly frail old woman. I couldn't swallow that. "Hey Rajiv," I whispered between gritted teeth, trying to keep a straight face. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I am taking this seat you are vacating. It is my entitlement." I produced my ticket with officious disdain, pointing to the reserved seat number and then underlining the actual pressed metal number above the berth with my finger while protruding my lips like a fool. "Let me walk you through this. This is my seat, and I'm leaving for a while and giving the seat to my friend." I pointed and smiled at the old woman, directing her into the seat with my eyebrows. "Now, I'm going to forgive you for pushing me into this metal bar, but you need to leave the lady alone. Do you understand?" His fat-laden cheeks quivered as best they could, and he aggressively pushed up against me. I knew I was only one decent punch away from yielding. I felt like shit, but somehow went straight to auto-pilot. "Did he just hit me?" I asked the interested spectators in the surrounding seats. I cowered momentarily before standing up straight and irreligiously flicking Rajiv in the centre of his forehead, just above the *bindi*. It wasn't that I'd put much torque into the

flick; it was just one of those happy moments where my mind and body effortlessly coalesced with the surrounding thermodynamic conditions and I achieved a higher state of technique.

“But she is a Dalit,” he screeched, holding his forehead, before beginning to wail like a car-crash victim.

“She is way ahead of you on the evolutionary curve, you fucking infant,” I retorted. “Now don’t let me find you in my seat when I come back here.” I spun around, winked at the passengers in the opposite booth and headed towards the door at the end of the carriage.

Wishfully, I stuck my head out of the window, trusting it would let the afternoon wind instruct me on a plan of attack for the mountains. The door was wedged open against an inside wall, so I stood with my back against its frame, leaning out and letting the wind blast me. I still had half a tola jammed down the front of my jeans for the journey, but I was in a satisfactory zone: nowhere near stoned, but safely distant from the drudgerous frequency of society’s sobriety.

Khanna train station zoomed by, surprising me that there was no stop for such a populated platform, and the outskirts of Ludhiana soon approached. I knew little of this area except that it was the home to a big carpet industry. I only knew that because some bullshitter tried to blow a Ludhiana rug through me while insisting it was a Kashmiri carpet. The countryside around the Punjab was surprisingly green, not exactly beautiful but hinting at the promise of rolling hills nearby. Signs of obsolete industrialism abounded, with bits of engines lying on grass verges near train tracks, and plenty of trucks were parked within sight; everything from oil tankers to dilapidated tractors. The air smelled a bit metallic, but it was an earthy, almost attractive pollution. As the train headed to the secretly moneyed town of Jalandhar, the Sun began to lose its strength and the mid-afternoon took precedence, with its effect on the fields the Pathankot Express was cutting through holding my stare for lengthy periods. I would almost recapture my thoughts from time to time, reminding myself of the plan... the plan? But the nervous energy of international travel, as well as the frantic scramble to vacate Delhi, had worn off me. I would simply catch a rickshaw to the bus station, and take whichever bus was next: Jammu, Dalhousie or wherever. I spent the

rest of the train journey fabulating and dismissing plans for each option, imagining the Himalaya in the image of a thousand invented memories, criss-crossing the hidden valleys with only randomly acquired destinations to guide me. There would be no plan.

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The rickshaw wallah looked at me with affected dissatisfaction as I slapped a twenty-rupee note into his palm outside of Pathankot bus station. "It's plenty," I stated, looking for the entrance.

"No sir, petrol is expensive." I couldn't pity a younger man with better prospects than mine, especially one running such a tired game.

"Look boss, it's a fifteen-rupee ride, max. So, I gave you twenty. I even gave you a lucky red twenty-rupee note. Do you want two tens instead?"

"No, I'll keep the lucky twenty note," he replied gratefully.

"Okay. Take care."

Pathankot bus station was faded and dusty, but surprisingly clean; as clean as it could be made considering the toll that had been taken on just about everything within it. I walked up to the hand-painted master timetable in the centre of the hall and tried to make out which busses were still due to depart so late on a Thursday afternoon. It was indecipherable: numbers, trains, codes were all meshed together, some crossed over and others partially rubbed out. Three layers deep of Sumerian palimpsests would have been easier to get a handle on. It was a pity all of its beautiful craftsmanship had gone to waste. The queues were short, but I had no idea which one to join, so I shamelessly played the White Card and pressed my face up to the metal grill between clerks and assumed a panicked look. "Bus to Jammu gone," I enquired despairingly.

"Eight-thirty bus coming," replied a passing employee helpfully. I looked at the clock behind the row of clerks; twenty to five. I was prepared to swallow an hour of waiting around this bus station, but no more.

"Any bus is going to Himachal side?" I enquired.

"Dharamshala bus is leaving now."

I turned around, following the clerk's head motion towards the far side of the station, and saw a bus backed into a bay, overloaded with cargo. A teenage boy in a grubby blue uniform beckoned me, with promises of fellow countrymen aboard. "Westerners are here. Going to Dharamshala... seeing Dalai Lama."

"Jesus," I whispered before looking back to the helpful clerk behind the iron bars. "Anything else in the next couple of hours, boss?"

"Mandi bus is leaving at six, but that is twelve-hour journey." He smiled obligingly.

I shook my head and grimaced. "Is that it?"

He shook his head in that strange rotation that signified the end of the line and picked up a pad from beside a ticket seller. "Chamba at five-twenty."

I looked behind him. A huge hand-painted route map adorned the wall. Chamba was a fair way up the mountains, seemingly on a road to nowhere. "Ticket for Chamba please, boss." "Certainly, sir."

I accepted a flimsy, weak-papered beige ticket with seemingly random numbers and letters running up and down both of its sides from the clerk. It was beautiful. Pointing to the bay and asking with outstretched palms, the clerk nodded and assured me my bus was coming soon. Soon meant I had time to kill, so I ambled over to a portable shop and snagged a bag of nuts. I was hungry, but I guessed with the Chamba bus's timing, I was in for a compulsory dinner break - where the driver drops everyone at a roadside restaurant that gives him and the bus conductor a free meal in lieu of baksheesh. I had at least a half an hour to fill. I didn't want to wander far, and I didn't need to. As I lobbed root nuts into my mouth and exited the station, I saw a man of about forty with a shock of black hair leaning over something on the pavement, jemmying a hidden object with a metal bar. Seeing me, he stood up abruptly, and I gave him a friendly sideways nod of my head. "Hello brother," he greeted in a soft voice. "You going to Dharamshala?" I laughed and shook my head. "I'm sorry brother. Are you a Christian?" Smiling, I shook my head again, taken by the purity of his hazel eyes. His narrow face looked at me in surprised nonchalance. "Everybody has a religion, sir. No?"

“Not me, brother. Or at least none that I know the name of.”

“Acha, acha,” he repeated before demurring when I held out the bag of nuts. I looked up to the Sun just as it began to drop behind a mosque across the street. It was that time of day again, where the sunglow makes everything more appealing and the lightening air enhances the dusty pollution. Nuts and diesel were keeping my nose occupied.

“You are right, sir. All religions offer glimpses of the natural spirit to followers before subjugating them into an order, a hierarchy to make money.”

“So, you don’t have a religion then brother?” I asked, smiling.

“I do puja to Shiva. That is all now.”

“Do you have a chillum with you?”

“No sir. It is at home.” I couldn’t detect even the slightest trace of opportunistic disappointment on his perfect features. He possessed strength in inaction.

“Do you have a cigarette?” He produced a cigarette from his trouser pocket and looked at me quizzically, as I pinched a nugget of hash from down the front of my pants with my left hand concealed inside my pocket. Feeding it up to my belt, I blew on a clenched fist and extricated the plastic-covered piece of solid.

“Magic my friend,” I announced. “Shiva helped me.” He smiled in anticipation as I proceed to finesse the tobacco from the cigarette with the thumb and index finger of my right hand into the palm of my left. Flashing a flame across the nugget, I crumbled it into the tobacco, quickly mixing it before carefully scooping the blend into the empty cigarette, jamming the overflow in tight with a matchstick.

“Let’s take a walk,” I suggested. He followed placidly, and when around the back of the station, near a fence overlooking some waste ground, I offered him the blunt, lighting it as he dragged eagerly and nodded knowingly. It wasn’t much—only an offering—and without speaking we smoked it slowly, watching the last sunrays flicker over the plastic trash and breezeblocks that littered the small stretch of wasteland. Happily in between thoughts, I stayed like that, peering into the unusual plastic colour schemes around me until the man tapped me on the elbow, alerting me to a

bus pulling into the bay. “That’s me,” I confirmed. “Take care, brother.” He smiled and walked away, but he didn’t leave me so easily.

I was still between thoughts as dusk settled and the bus passed Nurpur and a temple all the passengers except me acknowledged before turning to climb a state highway into the foothills of the Himalaya. In the fading light, a small gathering of trees bordered one side of the road. I could see faces with burning lights amongst the trees. Squinting, I made out an earthen footpath, maybe a route to a small hamlet. The bus driver was keeping a steady pace, but on the first hairpin bend, a car coming from the opposite direction forced him to slow down. Right there, maybe twenty metres into the wood, I saw a wild-eyed woman of about forty standing by a carving in the hollow of a tree. She looked straight onto me and didn’t flinch, the whites of our eyes meeting.

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## ***CHAPTER SEVEN***



“You have to get down here sir,” ordered the ticket inspector as Landell knuckled the sleep from his eyes before peering out of the window and into the darkness.

“What’s going on?” In the first moments of waking, Landell was still expecting rational, procedural explanations.

“Bridge is down on Goa side. Train is terminating here,” replied the inspector matter-of-factly while disengaging with a swirl of his head.

“But my ticket’s for Goa.”

“Bus will take you the rest of the way. You must hurry; seats are going.”

Landell let himself be shuffled out of the carriage, clinging to his sleeping bag as he loaded his rucksack onto his back. It was bedlam. Throngs of people pushed towards a ramshackle bus continuously honking its horn, the scene barely lit by a police car’s lights. Incessant hollering tilted Landell’s balance as he found himself increasingly aggravated by the shunting and stray hands flailing about his head. A sudden surge left him only a few feet from the door of an ominous-looking bus. He felt a desperate reptilian urge to claim his ground, elbowing potential passengers out of the way to secure a berth on a vehicle his brain was telling him to avoid. As he stepped aboard, he was given the dreaded “bus full” signal by the drunken driver, but he ploughed on, misdirecting the driver’s attention to the pushers behind.

Inside the bus was insanity: all the seats were taken, and all spaces occupied. Slamming his rucksack down behind the driver’s seat, Landell wedged himself into a gap that the bus conductor instantly claimed by furiously waving a book of tickets. Landell made a snap judgement to defer from fighting the injustice of having to pay for a ticket and ripped a fifty-rupee note from his pocket. It was the correct response. “Change

coming,” assured the conductor as Landell tried to focus on the scene outside: burning rubber, glaring eyes and metallic desolation all lent to a revolutionary feel. He just wanted to be in Goa.

As he tried to clasp his eyes shut, Landell could just about make out two dreadlocked Israelis being ejected from the bus for refusing to pay their fares. “Okay, twenty rupees for two,” was their final offer before the door crumpled in their faces, leaving them in the middle of nowhere at three in the morning. Slowly but surely, the bus crept out of the dusty wasteland it occupied and onto a narrow road. A couple of angry revs later and it was away, with Landell promising himself he wouldn’t open his eyes unless it was a matter of life and death. The drilling repetition of the bus swerving around traffic and through dishevelled villages eventually lulled him into a zone somewhere between sleep and hallucination, occasionally interrupted by sudden lurches forward when the driver randomly slammed on the breaks.

It wasn’t until morning sunbeams began to pry his eyes open that Landell registered a feeling of being in a not-so-Indian zone. The buildings looked slightly different: white facades punctuated the usual array of dreary concrete daubed with garish supplications. The visage of a bronzed woman carrying an infeasible load of fruit on her head came into view. He reflexively tried to pinpoint her age. A dignified experience emanated from her eyes while her taut body hinted at a laborious existence. She was followed by two teenage girls carrying loads. Up ahead was a crossroads; Landell could make out the crouched figures of traders setting up market stalls. Arching his back in vain to catch the name of a large public building, he then twisted around in an attempt to gauge where he could possibly be. Then came a tap on his shoulder. “Good morning sir,” bellowed a voice.

Landell turned to see a chubby middle-aged man staring intently into his eyes. “Err... good morning,” he replied with resignation.

“Sir is wanting to know the name of this town?”

“Not really; just trying to figure out how far we are from Goa,” replied Landell defensively.

“This is Goa, sir. We will be arriving at our destination in thirty minutes.” Landell smiled and sank back into his chair, peaceful in the change of atmosphere coupled with the knowledge he’d soon be let loose in one of the last levels of unionized spirit. Closing his eyes, he dreamily imagined how the beaches would be broken down, where the spaces would be where travellers shared stories of hidden gems located in the ley lines of India. Accepting there may be one or two touristy areas to avoid, it seemed it would be a cinch to get situated in a zone conducive to finding his way.

The bus took one last sharp swerve before stopping abruptly. The morning greeter declared their arrival, and Landell smiled forcibly before rearing his rucksack from its moorings and plunging into the melee barrelling towards the door. He was lifted all the way out, ducking sharply to avoid a metal cleat from ripping through his head, and somehow serenely deposited on the asphalt outside in the morning glare of Panaji bus station. The first thing he noticed was a posse of Euro-tourists dressed in what they approximated to be native garb being accosted by a couple of local wide boys dressed in fake Levi’s and casual shirts. A junction of desperation seemed to be meeting in an ideal place; an uneasy equilibrium even if one of the sartorial lurches was purer than the other. Attempting to power-breathe his grogginess away, Landell felt pangs of disappointment. He ignored them. As he looked around at the sparse glare bouncing off the asphalt, he caught site of a grey structure, what looked like a ticket office, throwing some shade out. Trying to pull his vision away from the fading psychedelic reachings of tourist clothes, he looked towards the rear of the station. Grand if slightly worn-looking colonial structures still held sway among the creeping tarmac. Some strange meeting of olden days and modern crassness seemed to linger longer than his imagined approximation of an extra-spiritual travellers’ refuge. Suddenly,

he was woken from his meanderings by a hand on his shoulder. "Welcome to the soul of India," announced a sallow wiry-looking fifty-year old.

"Yeh." The glare of the Sun added to Landell's irritation.

"Of course, things are not the way they used to be," continued the man, expertly switching mid-stream. "There has been much commercialization recently." Landell shrugged at the man's stumblings. "Everything is business these days: business, business, business."

"You make that sound like a bad thing," responded Landell.

"Ah." The man screwed up his face wistfully. "Business is okay, but too much..." Landell stalled and peered at him from under squinting eyes. "Yes... too many interests. Businesses, grassroots, Buddhists, even sly babas. Too much," the man declared definitively. Landell felt the heavy air circumvent the lightness of the man's message. Boom after boom of current left him reeling and spurred the speaker to continue with his stream of information. "Even if you choose the most enlightened of all these agencies, you will be wrong... even if you're right sometimes."

"So, let me get this straight: even if you're right, you're wrong," clarified Landell.

"Precisely, brother. You have to lope between the interests to receive the right way. Never go, however serenely, to the first and then the second and then the third. Take a look in between."

Landell looked around for the friend he wasn't due to meet for another five hours. There was something strangely civil about his surroundings. He sucked up the air and imagined the Goa he was bound to have introduced to him; one far from functional buildings and markets housing misguided necessities. As he refocused his eyes, he saw the sallow man signalling casually with one finger and slipping off towards a row of storefronts. Landell edged towards the shade of the white building and prepared for a hard floor and a long count.

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The cold hard marble of the hallway floor was beginning to melt into Landell's thoughts of coolly balanced gnosis when a familiar drawl cut through the stale air of the bus company's offices. "Heyyyyyy, we have our writer." Landell looked up to see the outline of the last friend he'd had in London: actor/writer/director/producer Kielan Walker.

"About time, Kie; I've been here for nearly seven hours."

"That's nothing in India, mate."

"Oh, fuck off. You'd better have something good for me."

Landell brushed at the creases forming around his thighs.

"All in good time," replied Kielan while blowing his sun-bleached hair from his eyes. "You must stop treating time like it is something under your control, brother," he added with a broad Yorkshire accent.

"Seriously Kie, I'm fucked."

"I know, I know; but I couldn't chance bringing anything with me... too many police stops. We'll be back at the beach house within the hour... hold tight. I've even sourced a couple of Surrey yoga girls for you to hang out with. Make time your friend, my friend." Kielan motioned Landell outside and towards a sturdy-looking black motorbike, which grumbled like a sick tractor when revved up. Landell kept his eyes almost shut, his tired bones yielding all control of his destiny on the narrow Goan roads to the keep of his usually stoned friend. Respite from the intensity of the mid-afternoon sun came and went with overhanging palm trees and occasional gusts of sea breeze. Trails of pollution found their way into Landell's nostrils, but the burned saltiness and humidity of the coastal atmosphere felt serene compared to the urban stench he'd been struggling to get accustomed to.

Dusty crossroads hinting at turn-offs to secluded beaches came and went. Locals who aggressively acknowledged the pair of Londoners always appeared to be wearing knock-off Western

garb, while those who went about their business did so in saris or lungis, throwing out the odd smile when glances met. Kielan gently hammer-fisted Landell's right hand, clasped to his friend's waist, and nodded his head towards the West, shouting something about "hippy full-moon beach" as they roared past a small gathering of roadside shops and houses. A few miles later, the oncoming expanse of an estuary halted their progress; they dismounted, shook their limbs free of cramp and came back together in time. "What did you say about hippy beaches back there?" enquired Landell as he caught sight of an approaching ferry.

"Yeh. That's where the full-moon party is at. It's worth a look, but crawling with cops. You can get yourself all spiritualized if you're not careful."

"Right." Landell averted his eyes from Kielan. "Is that our boat coming?"

"Yep. They've been threatening to build a bridge over the estuary for years apparently, but 'big corruption' is delaying it according to the locals."

"So, are you going to tell me where we're going?"

"We're going to the shanti beach... where it's cool to smoke and the police leave you alone."

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Kielan freewheeled the last few metres before he stopped by a pair of tall, bending trees. Landell traipsed behind his friend to the coconut-laden porch of a ramshackle bungalow with an elegant wooden roof patched up with small sheets of aluminium. A cool breeze momentarily alleviated the stickiness of his clothes as Landell wrestled with his backpack. There was no sign of a beach, or of any tourists. "How far are we from the beach?"

"Ten minutes walking through that there coconut grove brings you to a tourist-free rocky cove. Another ten minutes to the main beach, restaurants, bars and all. It's best to keep

yourself tucked away, just in case,” Kielan ruminated. “It’s pretty Spartan in here. You can always stay up closer to the beach if you need luxuries like running water.”

“How do you wash?” asked Landell with a pained expression.

“Bucket water; well is back side of house.” Kielan smiled broadly.

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A tarry feeling resounded about Landell’s mouth as Kielan led him through a network of sandy paths surrounded by palm trees into an opening just large enough to house a smallish wooden structure on stilts. The sounds of Pink Floyd re-verbed through a crackling speaker system, pulling any passers-by into the cushioned comfort of Moonwork, a bar with a likely mixture of 1960s Western pop themes and first millennium Hindu art, all instantly accessible. Kielan pointed Landell towards a space behind a small table, within earshot of a group of Europeans. “Two feni and lime sahib,” he ordered with a smile while Landell looked around disconcertingly. “Cool place, huh?”

“Yeah. It’s okay,” replied Landell.

“Not many people know about this place. Most punters stick around the beach. Then, there is the Buddha Lounge, in the middle of another coconut grove at the end of the beach. That’s where the designer hippies hang out. But this place is more relaxed; not so posy.” Kielan stretched his body out on a thin mattress while Landell sat cross-legged.

“Is it cool to smoke here?”

“Depends if the local cops have been given their baksheesh... we usually get a few chillums going towards the end of the night.”

Landell shot a quick glance towards a table of Europeans, trying to differentiate between the nationalities. A couple of obviously French people were driving the conversation, with occasional contributions from a subtler German, whom Landell

pegged for a Swiss. An Italian and a pair of English sisters completed the ring. "I mean to say I had never seen a mandala before I visited Dharamsala," claimed one of the sisters airily. "But I already knew it intimately; still, there's no worldly explanation."

"Yesss," overloaded the Italian. "I know I knew Shiva *lingum* from a past existence. There is no way I could have seen anything similar in India."

"This is the proof," asserted one of the Frenchman triumphantly. We have been here many times before, collected these experiences and are now bringing them with us. This is what we are supposed to do. We are being lied to by society because this is our real life reason."

"Sometimes, I feel something similar. I must have brought them with me from my last incarnation," concluded the other English sister.

Landell balked as images of lost paths long-ago travelled spliced through his thoughts. He was offended on some level while feeling an awkward draw to the group of Europeans... a vague tilt at his ego. He turned to find Kielan hanging his head over a palm-weaved backrest into the open air, where he could pick up a thick Dutch accent, portentously ruminating on the current misguided reliance on chemical highs. "For sure, it's like a lizard thing," the Dutchman asserted. "It's about some instant consumption for most of the people. Yesss, it is. But people need to wake up to the fact that the closer to Nature the drug is, the greater the quality you receive. Chemicals are not the answer." Landell arched his back in an attempt to catch a glimpse of the speaker but was thwarted by the shadow of a large palm tree. The man's silhouette appeared rangy in an almost teenage way, but the profile seemed wizened, creased with experience. It melted into the grove, simultaneously eliciting feelings of hope and regret in Landell.

Kielan sprung his head back into position and raised his eyebrows at Landell. "Do you want to join with the group over there," he enquired, motioning towards the Europeans. Landell



held a finger to his lips as the content of the group's conversation came back into range.

"So, our history of experience across different times is what created these various paths of truth," surmised the other Frenchman. "And so we bring them all together in the special place, like here tonight. That is the proof ultimate." Landell once again felt the frustration of flailing in a social ocean of misguided conclusions, but he was still light years away from being able to verbalize what exactly was wrong with what he was hearing. He shook his head. Kielan smiled at his friend's reluctance, oblivious to the suppression of past experiences and the beauty of travelling the paths that had been there for thousands of years, way before they manifested in a tired social practice. Landell returned into the conversation just in time to hear a careful Surrey accent declare her multiple heritages, from assigned bloodlines to past lives that always seemed to stop in the glorious stage of a particular civilization, be it American Indian, Nubian or Minoan. None of the declarations went back further than recollections of lounging in golden temples... never to apes scrabbling around in cow dung for fungi that could really improve your visual acuity.

Landell and Kielan suddenly came together in thought as a chillum and some hashish was produced, casually content at the tucked-away quality of Goan coconut groves, even in the face of disappointment. There was a space of blurred nostalgia that had been removed from the locked-down tourist haunts of Europe. A calmness pre-cursored what was to be a slow burn towards development, a process with plenty of undiscovered if diluted stages, a misdirection impossible to predict in the early stages of that decade.

Walking back through the trees and mazes of paddies after midnight, the Dutch accent slurred through the grove once again, accusatorially claiming that people were on an escape, shunning the various realities of their homes to acquire new ones on the subcontinent regardless of the real way. Illustrations and incontrovertible empiricisms got lost in the rustle, leaving

Landell hanging onto a stream that seemed closer than ever but was still lost among the overriding order of a formulated selection from a Vedic pandering that would lend just the right credo to positioning in the juncture of Goan soul tourism. The last conscious memory he had that night was a garbled conversation on the path leading from the grove back to the beach shack suddenly cut off by a local enquiring as to how many rooms his house in the West had, where his wife was and whether it was true that everyone in England got to meet the Queen.

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Violent rustling from below his windowsill cranked Landell from the final scene of a dream sequence flowing from London. He had been running all over Sinclair, demanding chunky up-front payments for his impending novel. "I'm a high-class word ho, not a behind-the bus station twenty-quid hooker," he felt himself mouthing as he came to with a thudding headache. Easing his back from the jagged springs and collapsing his legs onto the floor, Landell shuffled over to the window to investigate the rustling. A sickly grey pig looked up and squealed aggressively at the affront of being disturbed in its quest to uproot a sewage drain. He shuddered and made his way out into the hall, where the sound of Kielan's snoring could be heard from the adjoining room. Pulling a rattan mat onto the floor, Landell found himself assuming some awkward yoga poses, more out of a sense of obligation than purpose.

"Get the fuck out of that mate," barked Kielan as he pulled up his fisherman's pants. "Come on. I'll take you to brunch at Rosie's café. There'll be a nice selection of upmarket hippy chicks for you to stare at."

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An unlikely mixture of down-at-heel unwashed Northern Europeans, plastic designer Indians and trustafarians crammed themselves into a yellow-walled eatery, a confluence of old and what was to come trying to access an energy that had disappeared soon after Rosie's became known within the tourist set. Landell uneasily fingered a mushroom *bhaji* while Kielan merrily scoffed banana pancakes and caned coconut shakes. Once again, Landell felt like he had arrived just a few months too late but was really unknown infinities away from the true promise of a golden time. Smoking outside in the midday shadows were two figures within earshot, speculating on the rush to relocate in order to access what was left of the travellers' way in a weak attempt to detach from the prevailing trends of their home countries. "This is not the best way," whispered one in a faintly American accent.

"Maybe not," returned a Germanic voice. "But, I understand why people want to escape their home countries. They feel what has happened; they don't agree with that way of life."

"But they are just exchanging one model for another," retorted the American archly.

"Yes... a better one."

"A different one. You might like it more, but does that make it better? It's just that I've done the Goa thing. I'm all for people having fun, enjoying their time. But I'm ready to go somewhere bit more spiritual, like Hampi."

"Maybe you will feel the same way about Hampi after a while."

"Oh, I don't think so. There are places to have a bit of fun, and there are places that are deeper. I think I'll have another banana pancake before I leave."

Landell strained to faze his mind, unwittingly moving to latch onto a nearby stream that would avoid his thoughts getting stuck or arranging themselves. A vermilion swami seemed to appear out of thin air, smiling as he held an open hand sideways to his forehead, meekly entreating permission to sit down from

a table of three glazed late-twenties Japanese. Landell did his best to tune in while tuned out. He could detect the swami's assured deconstruction but was presuming the responses of the Japanese from a combination of prejudice and assignation. "Your country's system is the most excellent," the stiff-faced soul-mendicant declared.

"Thank you, but not..."

"Yes, a most excellent system," he reiterated.

"We have problems in Japan," replied a young lady.

"Of course... that is because you have the worst system."

"But you just said..." interjected a man who seemed to be the lady's boyfriend. The swami didn't miss a beat, instead moving back momentarily before leaning in close enough to his audience to breach their concept of personal space. "Yours is the best country at implementing the worst system. But you already know this, yes?" The three Japanese didn't stir. "But you are great searchers. That is why you have come to this holy of places. And you are very welcome at my ashram."

"We don't really want to sleep in ashram," replied the lady.

"No worry. Just day ashram workshop. Come to exchange and learn from many searchers and spiritualists; many meditations and yoga."

"How much?" asked the third, a highly coutured overseer.

"You pay as you please. He knows." The swami pointed to the sky before dropping a pencil-sketched map of his ashram's whereabouts on the table, bowing deeply and assuring his audience that everybody knows where Shavvi's ashram is and they are welcome anytime, in this cycle of life or the next. Landell followed the swami outside and watched him methodically march down a recently laid stretch of tarmac towards a general store.

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It was a dusty but colourful market Landell found himself kicking around in the late afternoon, a mile or two inland through the paddies on the far side of the beach road. Rows of pineapples and oranges punctuated dark sections of root vegetables, dull squashes and millet. He paused over the pineapples, considering the nightmare of hacking at one under candlelight on the stark floor of Kielan's beach hut. "Is the very best pineapple sir," announced the vendor proudly, resetting the canopy covering his stall to place his customer in the shade. Landell smiled and nodded his head diagonally, somewhere between West and East. "A very special price for you, sir. You are an English gentleman, correct."

"Not exactly."

"But you are English, sir?" The middle-aged fruit seller wrinkled his smooth bronzed skin, almost intrigued by the tourist facing him.

"That is correct."

"Five pineapples only two fifty rupees for you."

"It's too many. I couldn't eat five pineapples before they go off." Landell shook his head in feigned disappointment at missing out on a sale.

"For your friends then sir; and your good lady wife."

On cue, a man flitting between fruit stalls appeared by Landell's side and winked at him furtively. Sidestepping uneasily at the carny-like visage exploring him, Landell panic-bought two pineapples and fumbled some currency into the fruit vendor's outstretched hand, naively accepting a few punctured notes in return. "It's easy to get a wife," asserted the carny gormlessly.

Landell looked downwards and raised his eyebrows.

"What makes you think I want a wife?"

"But if you want love..." garbled the carny deeply.

"Maybe."

"Well, all you have to do is love them, be kind, make them laugh, understand their mind before they do, make them feel good, never make any mistakes and be rich."

"Is that all?"

“Yes sir, that is all. Well, until some random event changes their mind.” The man laughed gutturally and slipped in between a pallet of mangoes and a frail old woman, into the dusk. Landell turned around, a pineapple under each arm and started on his way towards the paddies. He had barely navigated the first watery patch when he began to fret at the matrix of caked mud paths laid out in front of him. As he moved away from the road and towards the heart of the paddy fields, where a cross-section of women were bundling sticks under an enormous crimson Sun, Landell recalled the fragments of conversations he’d heard from stilted English accents promoting the ultimate wisdom of examining all the different spirit shops in India before eventually forming your own step-by-step guide encompassing a little bit of everything with an underlying Buddhist libertarian slant. He thought he had heard this was the only way to capture that thing. Wondering whether a drawling mannnn had been tagged onto the end of the sentence, a wiry figure of about forty with an unusually humble moustache bowed to him and smiled. “Do you know the way, sir?”

“I think so,” bluffed Landell.

“In this fading light, it is easy to get marooned. Look over there,” added the man, pointing to the last of the field workers. “You can see the old ladies are getting ready to leave.”

“There’s still some sunlight,” suggested Landell.

“Of course, sir. And I can see why you were drawn to this way. There is something about the light at this time of day; not just here in the rustic beauty of the rice fields, but even in the town sides. I don’t know how to say in English. I am sorry, sir.”

“I don’t know either,” admitted Landell. “Can you say it in Hindi?”

“Not really sir. In Sanskrit it is possible. Something about the flow of energy; a kind of way. Anyway, let me guide you through the fields to your destination.”

“Only if you take one of these pineapples.” Head tilted downwards with eyes angled up to catch the orange pinks being thrown down by the setting sun, Landell listened to the man wax

on about the purple skies and the fading history of his corner of Goa, lulling him into an effortless trek through the fields before bowing softly at the edge of the beach road. After minutes of insisting on the other taking the pineapples, they agreed on one each and headed their separate ways.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT



The bus grumbled to a halt suddenly and the driver barked some inaudible instructions as he hopped out of a side door. I looked up blearily and watched half of the passengers frantically lurching for the exit while the others stayed put, not willing to gamble with their seats. Unsure of when I would get another feed into me that night, I decided to go for a ramble.

It was a nondescript little village, spread around a junction, with the turn-off from the main road disappearing towards some darkened hills, barely visible in the cloudy moonlight. Sidling up to the nearest street stall, I pointed towards the turn-off and eyeballed the vendor. “Where is this road going to, boss?”

“It is going nowhere, sir.” The man seemed suspiciously calm, his neatly proportioned face barely moving.

I’d momentarily forgotten I was now dealing with a mountain vendor, not a city one. “It must be going somewhere, boss,” I insisted before being met by an impenetrable shake of the head and an alluring smile. I was sold and frustrated. The prospect of thousands of side roads passing by unexplored left me with a beautifully depressed feeling. The unwilting attraction of Nature was fucking with me.

“It is too complicated,” the vendor announced opaquely.

“What is?”

“Nature: It is far more complicated than any new technology, or any new idea,” he announced.

“Yeah... well maybe,” I admitted.

“There’s no maybe my friend. Well, maybe things are a little different today, but not much. You can’t change the flow, don’t you know.”

“Of course I know that,” I blurted while looking through the fragile lighters he had laid out on his table. I’d just stumbled out of some prehistoric bus into this... a random knickknack seller sizing me up and kicking the shit out of me with ease. “But what about the other thing,” I whispered while firing my clenched eyes at him.

“What other thing, sir?”



“You know,” I replied dropping my voice hammily. “That whose name we should not utter.”

“Acha, the Atm...”

“Don’t say it,” I bellowed, holding one hand up.

“But he knows we are talking about him,” the vendor protested. “And he is everywhere, just as much in technology as Nature.”

“Heee,” I hissed disbelievingly.

“Acha,” replied the vendor.

“It may be everywhere, with us all the time, but to speak of it as if it cannot hear us is innocent my friend. Now, just the lighter please.” I walked away clueless, circling the other food stalls while kicking the lactic acid out of my legs, snagging anything that looked edible, from cold samosas to dry biscuits, waiting for the masses to vacate a jumped-up dhaba garlanded with posters of Ganesh and random Bollywood actresses.

All aboard, and we were off again, the woody smell of a Himalayan night creeping in through slits in the windows, the sated driver rhythmically swinging the bus into the Chamban darkness. I felt the nervous energy of travel drain out of me as it dawned on me I had physically put myself in the place; now I only had to watch things happen.

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I woke to a fellow passenger prodding my leg and grilling me as to why there is so much incest and fornication in the West. “Not this shit again,” I drawled, looking out the window to see the lights of a town up ahead.

“I am a sadhu,” he declared. “I am wearing this suit because I had a vital business meeting in the Punjab.”

“That’s great, man. Good luck with that.”

“So explain yourself. Why in the West...”

“Listen holyman. What about all the girls from these mountains who get trafficked into slavery, not to mention the cops who routinely rape criminals... male dacoits to you. You’re drawing on a weak hand with this ‘West is depraved’ horseshit. Anything else?” The bus did a one-eighty into a cramped station before the suited sadhu could scramble back to his high ground.

I grabbed my rucksack and jammed my body into the herd, dropping my feet right outside a desolate structure that was masquerading as “travelling businessmen’s lodgings.” It felt bad so I stalled, looking around aimlessly for something better. I was an easy mark. I began doing laps of a crumbling town centre like a flagellating pilgrim, staring down the bemused chai-drinking elders of business, but I was relaxed with it. Even ploughing through the standard stares and questioning was more pleasant in a mountain town, and there was less hawking to deal with. I was resigning myself to one of those alluringly desolate nights in an airy hotel room with gnawing sounds in the ceiling beams for company when a swarthy round-eyed man of about thirty sheepishly approached me, in broken English asking where I was going. I was preparing myself for the usual ream of questions, already assuming a surly expression, when his humbleness shamed me into engaging. I’m not sure whether it was the hypnotic lilt of his mountain English, the purely Aryan angle of his features that gave him the appearance of a non-ugly Englishman or the combined drag of the bus journey and the fading cannabinoids, but I limply followed his promise of a mountain retreat well away from the noise and fumes of what was a pleasant enough mountain town.

Regaling me with tales of ancient kingdoms nestled into this seldom-visited corner of the Himalaya, and of how the people here are very different to those of neighbouring valleys, I followed my latest guide obediently, my mind still in the airy hotel room I wouldn’t get to stay in, shepherding imaginary cockroaches out of view and ripping through the remainder of the hash I’d picked up in Delhi with nothing but the gnawing sounds to augment its sensitizing function. As I jammed myself onto a local bus, even more cramped than usual, I was met with beaming smiles from the other passengers as we all stood up against each other, seats barely visible under the melee on the last ride of the night. Shepherds reeking of wet sheep bustled against Gaddi elders replete with tribal headwear and corduroy jackets, while a couple of heavily made-up young beauties sporting fake designer purses one letter away from a prestige brand studiously ignored the attention they craved. I sleepily smiled at the staring shepherds as my guide proudly confirmed my country of origin before turning to address me. “Only twenty minutes... this is a new road,” he asserted as I looked

out onto the narrow, winding way snaking above a precipice leading down to an icy river. He had a softness to his face that hinted at a doted-on only son, but his words were egoless.

“No problem,” I lied.

“So, you want to go trekking sir. We can take a special route to Zanskar.”

“Sounds good.”

“But first you should rest for a couple of days at our lemon hut. This will give you the energy you need for a walk into the hills.” I dwelt on his use of the word hills while counting the bends between stops, foolishly convincing myself that we must be up next, the rucksack now cutting into my shoulder blades as the constant stares tested my endurance.

“Getting down here,” my guide ordered as I asked him his name again.

“Gulsh is my name, Mr. Luke.” He led me down to the river, where we crossed a wooden footbridge before commencing on a brutal ascent of about three hundred metres which had me sweating like only a white man could. As I let my rucksack collapse onto the cold rocks in front of the house, the entire family emerged with a strange mixture of hospitality and unnerving curiosity. Doing my best to smile, the portly woman of the house shooed her children away and insisted I get some supper into my travelling bones as I tried to work out who was related to whom. I was mentally done, my only motivation wedged into the lining of my boxer shorts. But the rice and vegetables were magnificent, well worth the wait, and the smell of frankincense was the perfect starter for an hour on my back ruminating on the promise of the following night’s star show to be provided by this Himalayan refuge. Even the coarse blankets, their scent drawing deep memories from childhood, filled my mind with serenity. It only took two mini pipes to have me drifting away with visions of Zanskar for company.

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The sparse wailing of what sounded like a woman well into her hundreds broke the final spirals of a dream in which I was rushing through lost meadows to pay household bills. Any warmth that settled in the room the previous day had been well eradicated

by the late autumnal Himalayan dawn - it was brutally cold. Poking my smoky eyes out onto the veranda, I saw the back of the man of the house, the scion of a mad dream. I figured it would be best to get a greeting out of the way to clear the decks... for a morning blaze. "Good morning boss," I blared, full of forced energy.

"Ah, there you are Mister Luke. It's a beautiful morning." He pushed his shoulders back, forcing his rotund stomach outwards.

"It certainly is." I looked down the mountainside towards the river bed, scanning the landscape in an attempt to detect the plaintiff cries of the old woman who woke me, wondering if I'd imagined them. A weak Sun, high in the sky, lent a fragile glare to the valley, with purple mountains to the north hinting at the tucked away valleys of southern Zanskar.

"Breakfast in twenty minutes is suiting you?"

"Perfect," I replied, measuring the time for an appetite-whetting smoke while begrudgingly admitting to myself I needed no enhancer to a mountain morning. Even in a place that seemed aeons away from the relaxed zones so strived for by the smokey set in India, I was registering something intrinsically crucial to the rest of my existence, and this time it wasn't one of the standard episodes common to Hindustan.

"A great artist killed himself today," blurted the scion.

"Every day," I thought.

"Hmmm. Why is that, Mr. Luke?"

"I don't really know a lot about artists." I was on automatic pilot.

"It seems like they go to a dark place in their minds. Many artists are having these dark thoughts," suggested the scion.

I selfishly considered how I could wrap up this talk, which was dangerously cutting into my smoke window. And yet I didn't seem to care much about that in the Himalayan air, which in itself bothered me. "Yeah, I suppose there are various reasons."

"But why is a successful person wanting to be unhappy. They invite some darkness into their lives and then they must have consequences. They lose the connection with the society around them," he concluded. He nodded contentedly, revealing patches in his greying moustache.

"They probably lost the connection with the quality that inspired them... lost the access," I remarked. The scion baulked

and made his excuses. He had to bid farewell to a horde of tourists who had just emerged from their rooms at the other end of the sprawling wooden guesthouse. Ponchos, dreadlocks and suspiciously expensive-looking rucksacks slid in and out of view as I edged backwards towards my room. A trail of social drug-taking emanated from them, hanging in the morning light, announcing their path whichever way they went. Some stilted Victorian patterns flowed from their ramblings about having to hurry to make a camel fair. An unlikely avuncular acceptance of officially bad behaviour came from the scion as he waved them off. Like an ashamed voyeur, I peeped out of a break in the curtains from my room, intermittently firing arrows of smoke towards an old fireplace in the corner, watching as the horde of English passed through the garden and by an enticing hammock perched over a sharp drop in the hillside. Promising myself I was simply smoking to honour my commitment to evolution via plants, I ambled towards breakfast, glancing down the mountain to the river bed, the final sight of labouring tourists reflecting the emptying fragments of my detox from England, readying my mind to start synthesizing if only I could crank my stubborn pineal into action. I was ready for breakfast.

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I lasted all of fifteen minutes rearranging my bones in the creases of a hammock made out of a discarded parachute, unable to justify my reptilian lounging while the Himalaya stared at me from every angle, before I spilled my frame onto the faded grass below, got to my feet and slowly took in as many vistas as possible, from the river to a serpentine road up and beyond the mountain facing me, with its few ramshackle houses barely visible. Folding behind were other mountains, seemingly layered on each other into the grey-purple distance. To the west, the Sun appeared stronger, its glare pressing down on the barely visible outskirts of Chamba. Peeling back to an adjacent hillside, I could make out what looked almost like a ranch; apparently it was the richer side of the valley, probably because it got the maximum amount of sunlight. And then back to what I now considered my mountain and the neighbouring property, which I heard the scion muttering about darkly at

breakfast. Even here on the edge of a minor mountain in the foothills of the Himalaya, the human dance for control was in full effect, with neighbours barb wiring their claims, cutting into cascades where unnecessary, hilariously playing out an amoebic power grab, with some interloper like me arriving unannounced and immediately calling it all mine for the time being.

Even amongst my aesthetic ramblings with their deluded claims, I could feel a deeper disconnect as I crouched high above the guest house, unaware of what route I'd taken among the ancient overgrown paths criss-crossing this tucked-away part of the Great Mountains. As the setting Sun lent its perfect hollow gold glow to everything around, I felt the West slipping away and some sort of synthesis beginning, or at least gently knocking on that deep-seated gland of the brain.

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“Mister Luuuuuke, Mister Luuuuuke.” A bin man, or whatever they're called nowadays, was rifling through my rubbish, recovering loose sheets of the first draft of some book I'd once tried to bullshit my way through when I was awakened by the politely elongated vowels of Gulsh, who had been designated as my Zanskar mountain guide.

“Sorry to be waking you, Mr. Luuuke.” Pulling my frame diagonally from under the iron blankets, my credit card holder went flying, lodging in a slat between the window frame and floor boarding.

“Sorry Mister Luuuke.” I heard fear and opened the door friendlily.

“Hey Gulsh. Are you ready to go already... what time is it? He looked down at a weighty wristwatch and then took a strapless fake digital contraption from his trouser pocket. “It's after eight, sir. Your breakfast is ready. I have prepared everything for our trekking.”

“Call me Luke. We're trekking brothers now. No mister, please.” Gulsh smiled broadly through a straggly beard and skipped back towards a clumsily-built patio, where he had almost finished bagging up provisions. I smiled, bent down and retrieved my credit card holder and ripped through the majority of my stash within ten

minutes, just leaving enough for a pain reliever to get me through the next day's stomping around Zanskar.

I motored through breakfast and was bade farewell, the family making me feel like a hero for carrying my own rucksack, while Gulsh and some wiry middle-aged man hauled ungodly amounts of provisions on their backs for a troupe of German tourists they were going to pick up at Keylong after reluctantly agreeing to dump me off on the road to Anantang. "We cannot guarantee your safety at Kashmir side," they pleaded.

"Good," I thought, icily insisting on going it alone into the Vale of Kashmir above their protestations. They didn't understand someone poncing about on their own in these parts, much less why I would want to go direct into the belly of the beast. I smelled religious or ethnic bias, but I didn't call Gulsh out on it. Anyway, he was soon beaming at the promise of that night's stopover in the family lodge atop one of the northernmost peaks within the Chamba district before we crossed the border into Zanskar the next day. And after six hours of a brutally vertical ascent where I saw nothing but overhanging branches and one tiny temple to Hanuman carved into a smallish boulder, the promise of a star strewn night deep in the mountains began to gain some credence when a narrow meadow opened up before my eyes.

After resting and lunching for an hour, we were on our way to the upper meadow, a vicious two-hour ascent, with plenty of switchbacks allowing for ecstatically rueful glances back to vermilion shrubbery and the bottle green upper slopes of unnamed hills.

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The guilt of non-declaration crept up on me as I lay on the only bed in a beat down wooden shack at the edge of a couple of acres of meadow atop a mountain whose name only the locals knew. I drew deeply on my flat pipe, fabulating ley lines connecting the ground under the bed through the Amazon and back to some inspirationally depressing London suburb. I had to reward these good guides for their brotherly efforts. "Yo," I shouted while pushing open the sole wooden window in the cabin. "Gulsh." He turned around obligingly, his tawny beard sitting uneasily on his

boyish head. He beckoned me over as he triumphantly lit the fire he'd set up, pointing upwards to a sky already awash with stars. I flexed my face conspiratorially, convincing him to skip towards me. "You have cigarettes, Gulsh?"

"Yes. How many you want?"

"I don't want any." I held a clenched fist over his open palm and dropped a nugget of hash into it. The glee on his face was contagious, his mountainous existence cruelly missing out on his home state's bounty by a valley or two and his habits unformed accordingly.

The outdoor dinner might have been bland if not for the excellence of it being passed through an open fire: woody potatoes summoning up my addictive bent, rice and dhal sliding down easily. Flat on my back, I needed nothing to help get me get lost in the swathes of stars. It was a different feel to the resonant thickness of the night air of the plains, but no less affecting. As clear as thought can get walking above the treeline in a real mountain range, there was still something different about a night under stars in the Himalaya, far removed from the hordes of spirit vultures, thinking of nothing with brilliant clarity and wide open to receiving, overflowing with the company of existence while all alone.

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As blindly optimistic as I was to tackle these beasts of the Karakoram, there was an element of going through the motions, though I wasn't exactly being dragged through the elements. Beyond any navigable roads now, we were heading into the late afternoon, with Agyasol to the north-east and Brammah to the north-west. The burnt colours of the lower Himalaya were giving way to the bottle greens and icy caps of the Karakoram. The air was different, not just in the smell of pines replacing the woody scents of Himachal, but something else: an obscure clarity was suggested by both the land and the few signs of human habitation. Stone offerings and prayer flags began to come into view as we reached Zanskar side. No border marked the shift between Islam and this hidden region's unique brand of Buddhism, but something much stronger did: traces of the source of an even older belief system of the area were in everything I felt.



There was something about traversing valleys trapped in between Buddhism, Islam and Shaivism, all underlain by Bon, while overlooking the more relaxed tributaries of the Silk Road that made it the only place you wanted to be, with any notion of mandatory Indian hangouts quickly dissipating into the Rigpa. I was lolling along contentedly a few paces behind the other two, distancing myself from any guidance if only to service the last remaining romantic strands of my ego.

“This is Zanskar,” announced Gulsh, as much in relief that he had chalked off another load of work as he was obliged to announce a marker on a tourist trek.

“Yes boss,” I acknowledged.

“Stopping to take photographs, Mister Luke?”

“No camera, Gulsh.” I stopped walking and slowly spun around. I could still see the burned mountains of Himachal, with Kashmir’s green to one side and Zanskar’s barren brown to another; Ladakh was only in my mind.

“Why no camera? Every tourist has camera.” Gulsh furrowed his permanently creased forehead.

“I’m still trying to fool myself that I’m a traveller.”

“Yes, traveller Luke; very good.”

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I felt guilty at how easily Gulsh batted away my offers to help set up the camp. Night was failing rapidly as my two guides cobbled together dinner. I was ready for a smoke, and itching to locate a source for some fabled Green Gold. Shovelling lentils into his mouth, Gulsh was more concerned with assuring me there would be no insurgents around our tent tonight as there was a mosque by a lake barely visible on the horizon. I could only envision freedom fighters holed up in a god house with me gormlessly trying to draw attention to my five day-old growth as a mark of Islam.

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After a breakfast of rice, chapatti and green oranges, Gulsh insisted on seeing me to the road-head in time to catch the morning bus to Amranath, but I was having none of it. I planned on tagging

along through the pass into Zanskar proper: I needed to see the facial features of the locals, feel their way and placate my mental map. After much hollering on the part of my guides, they accepted on the condition I would double back in time to get the late afternoon bus so as to hit the road to Srinigar before nightfall.

It wasn't just another tick in the soulless box of sightseeing accomplishment that induced me to get into Zanskar proper from this direction. It was more to do with putting myself in the place and letting the place put it into me. Unseasonal rains had left a green hue surrounding the glaciers dropping down towards the road to Kargil. As I approached a small gathering of short wooden abodes, a bronzed middle-aged woman with softly symmetrical features straightened her folded black hat upon catching sight of me. Her broad smile cruelly rippled her skin but was unable to cover her natural beauty. She beckoned me closer and spoke in pidgin, splicing Hindi into her Zanskari tongue. She wanted to know if I were a white Kashmiri, an Englishman or another harbinger of doom, like most of the strangers who barrelled into her tucked-away part of the world. Without waiting for an answer, she rooted some dried persimmon out of her cloth bag and offered it to me tentatively. I was in love... with a woman as far from me as the rules of the game could dictate, but more human to me than anyone had been in years. Her quizzically accepting look broke into an admonishing smile from time to time before she eventually shook her head and pointed towards the only road running through this stretch of the Himalaya. As she faded from view, I ruefully turned around and headed back for the road-head to Amranath.

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It was brutal, a full-blown panic fuelled by a driver who could offer no explanation for the bus breaking down. Darkness was descending, and teeming locals jammed themselves aggressively into its replacement, the last ride of the night to Srinigar. The bus driver did his best to wedge me in, but the crowd was having none of it. With frantic relief, he saw another government bus approaching, waved it down and was met with a hail of abuse from an effeminately goitred movie producer who insisted that it was a private hire. A bizarre push and shove pride-off between two

weakly men ensued, and I let myself go semi-limp out of amusement. Their entitled whining began to grate as their stubborn pushing threatened to tip me over, with the weight of my backpack shifting to one side. The bus driver looked at me from the foot of the steps onto the bus with real peril in his eyes. "Please sir, get onto bus. It is very dangerous for you in this town after dark." My deluded sense of Western indifference to danger was momentarily called out as I saw the frantic fear in the eyes of a government worker who shouldn't have given a fuck. I turned around and asked the moviemaker attempting to play the caste card to make some room for me while I passed. He confused my politeness with weakness and automatically squared up to me with hilarious confidence in his eyes. He had forgotten that my being outside the caste structure didn't make me the Sudra his subconscious had pegged me as.

"Touch me and I'll fuck you up," I snarled guiltily, the feeling of being a bully justified by the superciliousness of this elitist dipshit.

"Let me introduce you to my bodyguard," he replied haughtily. An Indian man of around the same height as me, but a whole lot heavier motioned to place his chubby hand on my shoulder. He might have been ex-army, but he had eaten way too much ghee in the meantime.

"Listen," I bluffed. "You might be big, but you're out of shape... you touch me, and I'll break your arm." I stared straight at him with a smirk. His eyes were kind; he didn't want this job and probably knew his boss was a prick. With a mass of locals beginning to bang on the side of the bus, the Hindustani driver revved up amidst the protests of the producer, who was now defeated from all sides. He sulkily sat down and sneered at me as I wedged my bag behind the driver's seat and perched on it.

"I work for a big Bollywood studio," he blurted while folding his arms defensively.

"Why would I give a fuck? So, you make garbage films for a bunch of deluded clowns." I was just being a dick now, riding on the wave of victory as the bus made its way towards the Vale of Kashmir. "Don't speak to me for the rest of this journey," I added. Ripples of laughter spread from the rear of the bus, causing the producer to turn and bark crankily at his underlings. It seems they

had been waiting for me for a long time and were loving this whole charade.

At the mandatory restaurant stop, as I kicked the acid out of my legs and put my unforgiveable temper down to no smokie, the bodyguard sidled up to me and held out a conciliatory cigarette. "He's not so bad when you get to know him," he stated, nodding towards his boss, who was anally rounding up his troops.

"He's an upper caste prick," I retorted

"He's not really upper caste; just a Kshatriya." The burly bodyguard took his wallet out of a back pocket and produced a picture of his wife and two children, who were no older than four. This guy was playing me like a pro. I smiled, took the cigarette and looked back into the restaurant towards a television fastened to the wall. This was enough for a bedraggled local to take the chance to start chiding me for some shit he'd just seen on the Devil's Box. In broken English, he insisted I explain the vagaries of starstruck Westerners.

"These rich people pay many lakh to be close to celebrities. But why? Just to be close to talent they don't understand. Explain this." His hurt desperation was kind of appealing. He was probably quite smart but had got marooned down pointless tributaries in his rally against the absurdity of modern society.

"I suppose they want to show their status by association and aren't afraid to pay for it. I don't know; I don't really think about it much." I patted my pockets in search of loose notes. He wanted more, but the bus driver was happily beckoning me, apparently also grateful for my earlier explosion. I plonked down on my bag, full of samosas and closed my eyes. After drifting for about half an hour, I felt an acceleration, as if we had hit a straight stretch of road. Opening my eyes, kerosene lamps on the roadside illuminated a tree-lined stretch. The feeling was unmistakeable. I had entered the Vale.

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## ***CHAPTER NINE***



“Full moon party tonight: don’t disappoint me friend.”

Kielan flicked an index finger at a dying lighter, straining to cajole a final flame. Recognizing the flint was dead, he began rooting around a stack of dusty shelves for a stray match.

“I’ve a lighter somewhere in my bag,” suggested Landell, using his elbows to prop himself up on a single mattress, avoiding the rusty springs jutting out from its side.

“It’s cool. I’ve got a light here.” Leaning over a sparse plywood table, Kielan sparked up a match, held it to the bowl of a bong and pulled sharply four or five times, causing plumes of smoke to quickly fill the air. “This will help me get a power nap in. Gotta be prepared for tonight.”

“I think I’ll give it a miss tonight, mate. I was planning on doing some writing.” Landell was now standing, moving towards a narrow window looking out onto a sandy path leading towards a dust road.

“Fuck that. You’ll get enough material for three books at a full moon freak show,” promised Kielan, who was helping himself to seconds.

“I don’t think it’s my scene.”

“Maybe you’re right. Some of them are quite lame... it’ll be full of flakes come to mention it. Then again, you’ll probably get even more material off of them.”

“I really need to get down to some work.” Landell exhaled

“You never know; sometimes, there are a few cool people around. Yeah sure, you get the blow-in tourists, but there are usually some long-termers there; some real spiritualists. Just take a few pulls on this bad lad over here and see how you feel when you wake up.” Kielan motioned his friend towards the bong.

“Well...”

“That’s the spirit. We’ve got to enjoy this place before the wheels come off.” Landell awkwardly grasped the bong, shuffled his fingers around, pulled hard three times and stumbled back towards the mattress, thinking of London.

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Landell strayed around the periphery of the beached gathering, remaining within earshot of those at the margins while a throng of tattooed Europeans sporting deep tans huddled around an orange-clad sadhu by a small fire. Tracing his eyes around the less committed people at the edges of the group, something registered within Landell. He couldn’t decide if it was communal coolness or a lack of pretension. But purity was on his mind, cut through with unforced cultural markers. He was beginning to drift when a long, shoulder-less dress occupied his vision. Graceful at first glance, Landell began to study the careful poise of the wearer. She looked Italian from behind, with raven hair in a ponytail resting on a bronzed back. Two deliberately tanned men in their early twenties stood either side of her, each holding a conch while taking turns to tell a story she was barely acknowledging. As she manoeuvred to attain some space, she caught Landell staring right at her. Her initial impulse was quickly replaced by a careful measuring of moments. That ego trigger had Landell filing her away as just another contrived socialite. Turning away, he settled his ears on the broad accents of three nearby Mancunians and fell onto the sand, into a splayed sitting position. He let his head hang backwards. “Ya think it’s all bloody good living in Goa, but you’d be bored here too after a few months,” asserted the first voice.

“Better bored here than in fuckin’ Manchester,” replied someone out of sight.

“If I could sign on from here, it would be gold.” Landell closed his eyes and tried to detect which of the three was saying what.

"Ah don't know. Escaping one version of life for another can't be the solution."

"Sounds like a good fuckin' solution to me." The three of them laughed before declaring it was time for a smoke. As soon as they'd all taken turns on a chillum, they began to lament the reason they'd come to India.

"What was the reason again? Was it to find something different to smoke or to clear the smoke from our eyes?"

"I'm too wrecked to worry about that. Things'll take care of themselves."

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"But love is a dark force, an ambition that leads to the ways of selfishness." Landell loitered around the edge of a group of about a dozen tourists, including Kielan, who were in thrall to the ramblings of a crimson-lunged Aryan-headed man pushing sixty. He kept on running his right hand over his bronzed shaven dome as if drawing out insight after insight. Landell was unsure whether Kielan was locked into the message or one of the immaculately dreadlocked young women to his side. "Yes, the sweet yearning of love once requited can soon take a longer road, winding its way to some unfortunate locations. That is for sure... and not just in the West." The only member of the audience who didn't nod was a hollow-faced Dutchman who was busy cleaning a chillum with a shoelace. Kielan noticed Landell standing uneasily a few feet to his left and ushered him to sit down. "The taboos of love will not die," continued the speaker. "They may shimmer gently in the distance, but they are ready to engross anyone at any time, which is why young people are now trying to extend their single life. These taboos have been with us since the dawn of time, and they'll be with us long after we're gone."

"*Dat hochstront*," blurted the Dutchman as he looked up the barrel of his chillum and into the moonlight.

“Pardon, my brother,” replied the guru, smiling with an awkward tilt. “Don’t be shy. We are all friends here.”

“I’m not shy. You’re speaking a load of horseshit.”

“I don’t think anyone else here agrees with you.” The guru moved his hand in a sweeping motion, smiling broadly.

“Doesn’t change the fact that you are talking a load of *hochstront*,” reaffirmed the Dutchman.

Landell slipped away as the audience looked around restlessly. He moved on down the beach towards a rocky outcrop, where he thought he might find some quiet. Resting awkwardly against lemon-coloured rocks, he leaned back to capture a fuller view of the constellations above. Attempting to map some names he wasn’t sure if he’d ever located, the bulk of the new mooners were a couple of hundred yards away but seemed out of range, a tiny smattering on an infinite palette. Drifting, he was suddenly jolted. “It’s hard to work for any of these companies and retain any honour. They’re fucking the world.”

Landell felt irritated at being cornered once again. “Just don’t work for them, then. They’ll soon disappear.” He looked around the darkened recesses of the outcrop but couldn’t detect any shapes to pin the voices to.

“Fuck, we’re so locked in,” added another voice.

“Those entities can be gotten rid of with no more than a flick of a finger if we broke our mental attachment to them. We’re just not ready; it’s not them, it’s us.” Landell looked up to try to gauge the height of the outcrop protecting him, but he couldn’t make out its apex. The tide was beginning to lap around his feet; to his right there was no sign of anyone. This visual absence was somehow pushing him farther back from the margins of the main gathering. Italian house music spliced with the soulless drone of Goan trance began to fill the air, but he could still pick up the dialogue.

“Stop thinking, and start being.” Landell looked around again and saw a swirl of light from a small fire darkly illuminating three faces. One of the three broke away and came towards



him, revealing himself as Indian, possibly Gujarati. He was around the same age as Landell and comfortable in addressing him square on.

“Hello my friend. You are enjoying the festival?”

“The festival?”

“Yes, the festival of life. All of this dancing is magical.”

Landell followed the man’s motioning and saw some bare-chested European arrogantly gurning ankle-deep in water. “Yes, this is good: the pure enjoyment of life.” Landell nodded while eying a vacant stretch of sand at the far side the beach. “It’s good to get away from all those organizations trying to control us,” the man blurted as soon as Landell had put a few feet of space between them. “Yes, every organ...”

“Are you a sadhu or something?” enquired Landell, examining the scar running down one side of the man’s face. It was electric pink against his brown complexion, pointing towards full curved lips. His eyes were too small for his face.

“No. I am coconut farmer. Up in the trees is a good place to think.”

“So what did you find up there about organs?”

“All these organs have their own interests at heart.

Business, ashram, dally llama, roots of grass; all same. You can pick the best parts from each side, but this is not real enlightenment. It is still wrong even though it’s right, sometimes. “

“Maybe... I suppose it depends.”

“Not really depending; there is a way, and it is in between. Don’t try to capture this way; just get in between and receive it.”

“Okay.” Landell’s focus was oscillating between the swaying bodies in the distance and the confidence of his advisor. He re-focused to see the man’s eyes burning into him.

“Do you like boys?”

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*“Cello, namaste.”*

The words rang in Landell's ears as he sorted through the faces peeling away from a fire blazing dangerously close to a makeshift turntable. The encroaching tide had yet to be noticed by the Italian disc spinner. Dosed on ketamine, he could barely feel the heat of the fire on his face as the exterior of his hub began to crackle. Most of the partygoers had begun to move up the beach towards a designated zone for lounging while effusing over their experience. At the far side of the zone, Landell spotted Kielan talking to two girls with the appearance of university students. His friend looked up blankly and beckoned Landell over. "Hey mate. Meet Fern and Zara." Landell nodded and smiled, extending his hand to rings of namaste. "Sit down. We're going to have a smoke; these ladies wanted to get away from the crowd."

Holding her palms together, Fern's sun-bleached hair fell over her face as she nodded in agreement. "It's a bit more chilled here," she proclaimed, turning her eyes toward the main phalanx of relaxers while compressing her mouth knowingly.

Landell turned and noticed a sprawling group of twentysomethings coming towards them. Further along the beach was a similar sized group comprising of tourists of varying ages. Back by the coast road, the premier resort in the area was still flickering with the lights of monied holidaymakers having midnight cocktails. The layered spectrum of the beach's inhabitants flitted through Landell's mind as he uneasily took a joint offered to him by Kielan. Pulling on it carefully, he was surprised to feel the distinctive flow of grass hitting his lungs. Inspecting the method of delivery closely, out of the corner of his eye Landell could see Kielan smiling. "It's Indian grass. Not great, but it'll do for a change. Anyway, these girls are afraid of chillums."

"I'm not," protested Zara. Kielan smirked expectantly before they all turned upon hearing the unsociably loud voice of an athletic-looking American declaring he wouldn't compromise.

"Life and death," the Californian accent bellowed. "Yep. They are two things I won't compromise on." Landell turned

awkwardly and noticed other beachgoers shuffling in the sand as the proclamation sat still in the air. Kielan was beaming while Fern and Zara bobbed their heads. "Space and time... can't compromise on those either," boomed the American. He was now beginning to search for eyes to lock onto. Kielan was the only taker, louchely pulling on his joint in expectation of the next revelation. "Going forward and looking backward." Kielan began to choke on his smoke. A Mancunian voice declared that he had enough of this shit. His head on a pivot, Landell tried to locate all the players.

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"How did that Swiss bloke discover LSD?" Kielan was leading Landell out of a coconut grove and towards a patch of beach dotted with yellowish rocks. The early morning sun was emitting a gentle heat, enough to warm the bones. There was no sign of any tourists on the beach; only a couple of fishermen busy dragging in nets from their previous night's work.

"I'm not sure," replied Landell. "I guess he was messing around in a laboratory he worked at."

"No. I mean how did he get there? What type of process would be used to discover something so different... so novel?"

"I'm a writer, not a scientist."

"Then how do you come to some discovery?"

"I don't know. Sometimes, I just try to work it out; these days especially. I think when I liked writing it was different. It just seemed to jump out and grab me... that is, if I was in the right frame of mind to be grabbed."

Kielan stood on a rock and pointed to a wide sweep of beach off in the distance, probably two kilometres in length, forming a perfect arc. He turned around and looked back towards the beaches that would be overloaded with hawkers and gawkers within a couple of hours. "You can't see the secret beach from here. See where the coastline goes in just before the start of the arc. Well, it's an optical illusion. There's a beach in

there, and very few people know about it. The big beach used to be quiet, but now there are travellers sleeping out there, trying to get a new scene going. Come on. Let's get over there before any of the early morning hippies spot us."

Landell looked back towards the named beaches of Goa in the distance. He could just about see the makeshift stalls being set up. Indian traders were gathering, laying out their plans for how to service the strange form of surface Ganeshism that had left an uneasy sheen on most business transactions around the beaches. Even from half a mile away, Landell picked up on a strange whiff of the desperate attempts to construct what tourists seemed to want: all mod cons with a healthy dose of tatva. But up ahead was the beach for the shanti travellers, or those who weren't as interested in washing. But what about the true searchers? The thought dissipated before it could fully form words in Landell's mind.

"There it is," declared Kielan as they cut along a sandy breach in the rock formation. A postage stamp of a beach looked sorry in the wider sweep of the coastline. Set back from it were a few lonely looking coconut trees. "The deluded retro heads don't know about it yet."

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## CHAPTER TEN



Dal Lake as dusk turns into splintered night is a different type of hustle. The warm air trapped by the surrounding mountains lent a relaxed but slightly ominous feel to the water's natural beauty. I had successfully snuck off the bus and into an auto-rickshaw without being copped by any of the station's boathouse agents, and I was now getting mentally ready for the lakeside hawkers. I quickly stopped preparing myself. The sight of my long body would be enough to cause a fucking feeding frenzy of biblical proportions. As the rickshaw driver arced to a halt by the lake, I stepped out while palming him a twenty and waited for his indignation.

"It is forty rupees, sir, to Dal Lake; petrol is expensive."

"It's a fifteen-rupee fare, and I'm giving you twenty... be happy." I walked away slowly, looking out towards the lake, backpack hanging slovenly from one shoulder, and prepared for the barrage. Tentative approaches, confused looks and Kashmiri mutterings spliced the air as I watched kerosene lamps flickering into life on the numerous houseboats.

"Houseboat sir," came the first offer. I turned around to see a cross-eyed unshaven man of about fifty limping towards me. "Best on Dal Lake."

"I'll be staying on Nagin Lake boss," I retorted.

"Nagin Lake very lonely sir."

"Good; that's the idea." I could see I'd revealed myself too soon as the man's eyes flashed with anticipation.

"Come with me. My cousin has boat there... very nice."

"Cheap and best?" I enquired.

"Yes sir: three fifty a night with meals, special price. Come on, we can take my friend's rickshaw for cheapest price."

The roadside jetty was desolate but the almost empty sprawl of Nagin Lake looked invitingly peaceful in the moonlight. Insects flitted around the solitary lamppost illuminating the jetty-side. My limping guide whistled abruptly and a short figure emerged from under the covers of a long, sorry-looking boat that locals called a *shikara*, a poor but interesting-looking relation of the gondola. After some mandatory bargaining, we were aboard and I could feel the

sway of the lake beneath me, a lulling passage to the land of Green Gold.

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My default position was to like Kashmiri families, even when I saw the signs of the hustle approaching loud and clear. And as my hosts brought in that night's dinner, on hilarious silverware, they had no idea how happy I was to see the simplicity of the food. Stewed spinach, boiled potatoes and cardamom-infused dhal sat beside some of the lightest rice you can find in Central Asia; this wasn't South Asia anymore. The sharp features and doleful eyes of the Kashmiris barely concealed a softness brought on by centuries of wonder. As I wolfed down the meal, I could feel the eyes of the family sizing up my reaction. The ancient father sported a look of casual acceptance; he'd seen all this before. His thirty-year-old doughy son, who initiated marriage chatter whenever the conversation would rest on anything non-food, was trying to place me in the spectrum of tourists to India, throwing mentions of Pink Floyd in the same sentence as shopping for trinkets. The mother, mid-fifties and crying poverty at every opportunity while lounging in an ocean of silk pillows, was eying me up with a mixture of pleading and suspicion. I knew what was coming. As she shuffled out to the kitchen to prepare the post-dinner tea, the son opened up. "I'm sorry about my mother. She is sick."

"Here we fucking go," I thought. I quickly traced my mind back through the various houseboats I had stayed on over the years. My sample size was starting to become undeniable as I pictured myself as some white grim reaper. Every mother needed an operation. Their tack was so old that it was in danger of looping back on itself. "Don't worry about it. She doesn't have to do anything for me," I replied with gracious selfishness.

The son quickly switched lanes. First, it was preppy complaints about how he had to work six months a year in the tourist spots down south. Then, it was about what I wanted to buy on the lake? I wasn't even going to spin him a yarn. "Green Gold," I announced matter-of-factly.

"Ohhh, how do you know about that?"

“I know about the important things. I might also pick up some pashmina and saffron.”

“Excellent choices. You know much.” I could feel him massaging my ego as commission streams coursed through his brain. “I will introduce you to my friend after dinner. He can give you what you need.”

Fuck knows what mystical network of communication is in effect on the lake, but word sure does travel fast. I barely had time to sit down and think of boredom when the first shikara of the evening pulled up to the houseboat’s veranda. These thieves of the night had no shame. They would just barrel right onto my supposedly private veranda, knock once and slide open the door to the lounge... where I could conceivably be up to all sorts of madness. The first to try his luck was middle-aged and suspiciously overweight for someone crying poverty before his ass had hit the chair he ceremoniously asked my permission to occupy. I motioned him to sit down with a smile and strapped myself in for the fun.

“It’s very nice to meet you, good sir. A very good face you have.” I nodded my head sagely, feeling myself moving at one with the lark. “The owner of your houseboat asked me to drop by. Now, can I interest you in some of the finest silver? Oh, excuse my manners; did you have a satisfactory dinner, brother?” I leaned back onto a pillow, which allowed me to fix my eyes on the ceiling. It was stunning: deep brown with hand-carved semi-circles overlaying cylinder-shaped green and red inlays, all perfectly proportioned. I couldn’t make out where the wood stopped and the painted papier mache began; it was spellbinding. Meanwhile, the poor bastard was falling over himself trying to open up a trunk so full of gear that he revealed he was lugging around more weight than I had made in years. His eyes blazed in medieval wonder. I was loving every moment of his shtick.

“Have you got any *Green Gold*?” I blurted.

“What, sir?”

“You know what I’m talking about; something to make the pain go away. Smoooooooooooooke.”

“No sir; I don’t do that.”

“Well then... ship someone around here with some decent gear.”

“Pardon, sir.”

He looked genuinely bemused as I let my eyes circumnavigate the room. Hardwood cabinets were filled with carved ornaments and hand-woven displays. I couldn't understand how such things had been categorized back in the West, how art is stratified in any way. I was overloading, but it was no use looking down. A history-laden silk Kashmiri carpet contained more than I could let in. I looked directly in his eyes. "I was just testing you, making sure you're not a drug dealer."

"No sir, drugs are bad. I would never..."

"You're telling me you never have a sly *bubbly bubbly*. Really?" I frowned and smiled while lowering my head.

"Maybe on a special occasion."

"Yeah right. Show me this silver then; and no crap."

"No sir, only the best for you..." I almost felt bad for being such a rude prick, but I knew these traders loved it. It was the condescending post-colonialist niceness of the standard tourist that really gnawed at the souls of these ancient peoples, I had decided. By portraying borderline anger while haggling for trinkets, I allowed them to slip into their role of subjugated locals who could justifiably overcharge the oppressor. From there, it was just a matter of hammering out a mutually acceptable White Tax. Anyway, I was such a pussy deep down I would always give them a nugget of hash or some Western foodstuff when they went on their way. But the value for me was in the dialogue. And I wanted maximum value.

"This is handmade jewellery, sir. Made with hands," he continued staring at me ominously.

"Handmade jewellery is everywhere these days, boss. And don't call me, sir. I'm Luke."

"Yes, Mister Luke."

I rifled through his box of goodies while he spewed some hackneyed diatribe about the uniqueness and workmanship of the pieces. The reality was that they were stock pieces made of middling silver and uninspiring stones. I was trying to find some unique design, some sign of the maker getting out of the way. And Kashmir was one of the last places you're likely to find this in its unadulterated form. These were master craftsmen and women: their carpets and papier mache were unreal. And the last generation of artisans was still at work, removing themselves from the process and allowing the way to flow straight through them and facilitate



the subtlest of art... all for pennies. No blurb-infested exhibitions or soul-addled gallery showings were necessary. There were still beautiful loose cannons among the workshops of Kashmir's secluded villages, most of them being unmercifully raped by the local traders, who in turn jacked tourists for big bills. Art was alive in the Vale if not in this particular trader's merchandise. "There's nothing here I like boss. I'm sorry."

"But sir, these are the best of best pieces."

"You know I want to buy something from you, but you don't have anything I want." I began to examine the carpet underneath me. I couldn't fathom how blues, greens and reds looked so new to me.

"Just... please," he stuttered. "A good luck purchase; one thing for good luck."

"Good luck for who, boss?"

"Come on my friend. We are both people of The Book. We are cousins. We are not like those Hindus with their fucking hundreds of gods... what is that anyway? That cannot be true... how is possible?"

I covered my beaming grin as he went off on a wonderfully frustrated tangent. He deserved a sale for the gold he was speaking, but I knew I had to stay strong and keep these traders on a price-cutting tip. "I don't read books, boss."

"What? You haven't read The Book?" He looked aghast.

"Fuck no; what would I want to read books for?"

"So... no sale?" he enquired solemnly.

"Not tonight, boss. Very tired... travelling too much."

"How about tomorrow night." He looked at me greedily. The lake must have been quiet.

"Yeh, if you bring some Green Gold around; and none of that dry, flaky crap. I want the cream."

"Yes sir. Yes sir. We can do this business. I am hungry for this business. But it's not easy to get these days. You know it's costly."

I narrowed my eyes and threw a ridiculously hacky look at him. "Now is harvest time; not so costly."

He looked horrified. "How do you know that?"

"Because I'm a nature boy." He grimaced with the disappearance of imaginary future profit streams. Silent at last, he

shook his head pensively as he childishly packed up his jewellery. I couldn't resist nudging him as he went for the door. "I was only joking brother. Bring some pashmina tomorrow, and I will try to buy something."

His face softened, the hard creases unfolding. "No Green Gold, sir?"

"Nah... I only smoke brown."

"It's possible, sir." His eyes glinted as he pulled the door shut behind him.

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The next twenty-four hours were a blur of me trying to count eagles in the sky above Nagin Lake in parallax with a swathe of pine trees running along the shore of the waters while a bad brew of traders moored alongside the veranda, attempting to sell me everything from medieval knives to detergent. Engaging them usually resulted in their sulky indignation when failing to score. Ignoring them was often a torturous affair as they hung around just out of view like jilted lovers. But only a couple of days of this dance was usually necessary. Word soon spread among traders of what I was good for, how much they would be able to squeeze out of me. I was going to have to keep the purveyors of the real quality interested enough to maintain a hope of fucking me royally before begrudgingly accepting a reasonable profit.

And that was Kashmir on a houseboat. Lazy days soon melted into weeks, with a healthy supply of the creamiest Green Gold for as pure a smoke as you will ever experience. Harshness only seemed to exist in the churlish demands of Hindu soldiers overstepping their authority during my occasional jaunt onto dry land to stock up on provisions. Lightness abounded, from cardamom-scented drinks to the airy pine smells of the forests I walked between the lakes and outer villages as I aimlessly searched for the oft-referenced location of the real quality. On these stoned walks, I would think back to the stock answers of the traders as I hazily tried to garner information from them. "From the village," they would reply opaquely. And they readily blew that bullshit through me the first few times until I realized they were trading on the Western tourist's delusions of Oriental mystery. And though I

was never to find the famed village, I did find something even further out of sight.

It was as non-descript a shop as you could find, peddling cigarettes, drinks and household provisions. I always stopped at that particular one because the owner had beautiful manners and was never pushy... and I was a sucker for that sell. The proprietor, in his thirties, smiled broadly as I fumbled around with notes and chided myself for my errant thoughts as I tried to recollect what I was short of on the houseboat. And on the one day when I'd gone ashore before having a smoke, childishly proud of my sobriety, he wasn't there. In his place was a man of at least seventy, who held in his face the easy wisdom and gentle smile of a true outlier. I was astonished yet completely at ease as he communicated with me without words, his facial movements, dips of his large angular frame and nods towards nothing filling my mind without ever bogging it down. And it was all the more remarkable as it was a fallow day from the smoke, which invariably led me to being off kilter and ended up in some painful yet mundane accident. But not even the fallow could stop the river of truth this Kashmiri man of the Way directed towards me. There were no words to adequately explain it, yet I was surer of his authenticity than anyone I'd ever met. If you could extend in golden streams of light that imagined quality you ascribed to the most graceful of women and couple it with the sagest of unforced understanding, you might get an idea. But it was nothing that had me thinking... there was no need to attempt to break it down as just knowing it was the ultimate in explanations.

As I lounged in a cushioned shikara on my way across the lake to the houseboat and tried to blame the residue of Kashmir's finest for what I had just experienced in that shop, I knew I was falling into the horribly soulless trap of procedurally trying to explain away something much greater than such a mechanistic analysis would allow. After dinner, I casually dropped it to the patriarch of the houseboat, eyeing him carefully for his response. "So, do you know that old man who works in that shop in the village we went to?"

"Which shop is this, Luke?" The bronzed Kashmiri man chewed happily on the remnants of his dinner while reaching for a used teacup. He shot a playfully disdainful look at me. "There are many shops my friend."

I smiled and followed his eyes. I liked this old fucker. He had seen many a Western bullshitter blow through these parts before. "Remember a few days ago when we went for a shave; the shop we stopped at for a lighter. Some old man was there today: grey beard, a very unique face."

"Ah," he chuckled softly. "That's the father of the shop."

I was trying to figure out what that meant as the Green Gold began to faintly beckon me for my post-dinner ritual. "Yes, that's the shopkeeper's father."

"Tell me about him."

"Tell you what, Luke?"

"He's different. He knows something."

My host smirked gently. "How do you know about him?"

I considered issuing a clichéd answer but instantly recognized there was no way to explain it, bar putting it down to feel. "He's different." It was all I could muster. I felt like an emotionally retarded soap opera actress. My host nodded. "What does he do?" I continued.

"He's a kind of doctor."

I grimaced in disbelief. There was no doctor alive with that kind of soul. "He's not a doctor."

"A kind of holy man," my host reaffirmed.

"For real?" He nodded calmly and reached for a crust of Kashmiri bread before dipping it in honey. "Where does he live?"

"In a brick hut."

"Really?" My host looked disinterested in my questions, as if we were discussing weather conditions that everyone could already see.

"Does he not have big money, many lakh?" I winked theatrically.

"He is not taking any money. You know these hospitals are taking many lakh for that bone disease... how do you say in English?" He swallowed the husk of the last piece of bread and waited for my response.

"Cancer?"

"Yes, that cancer. It's costly," my host asserted. "But he is curing for free."

"Oh yeah. How's he doing that?"

“I don’t know how to explain. Some energy.” He rose to his feet and declared it was time for a rest. As I followed him out to the narrow hallway leading to my sleeping quarters, he asked me if I was ill. I shook my head, thinking about the sickness I was about to indulge in.

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I knew it would be a mistake in most people eyes, but when a happy cycling seventy-year-old man cruises up beside you and offers you brown for a pound an ounce, and upon inspection it’s the purest shit you’ve ever seen by a country mile, I think it’s reasonable to say you are left with little choice but to partake; there’s nothing worse than a churlish tourist. And as I sat on the roof of the houseboat with the afternoon Sun caressing my face, the deep, beautifully grimy hit of the hubbly bubbly had me remembering why I had earmarked so much time for the Lake: that delusion of a book I’d threatened to write.

I scrawled barely legible notes on a few loose leafs of paper with a burst biro, half hoping for the manky after-feel of brown, but it never came. Maybe it was in the stainless steel spoons Englanders are obsessed with, but the papier-mache finish of the pipe I was using just embellished the hit as I lay flat on the slate surface of the roof, with the sheen from the corrugated metal gable-end bouncing all over my face. I placed the pen and paper by my side, wedged the remaining errant brown treacle back into the pipe’s bowl and pulled hard, persisting even as the lighter flame threatened my thumb. There was nothing like that river of gold, meandering its way from your brain through your limbs, sensitizing you like never before while removing all traces of pain. There was a reason why good people spiralled into crouching messes in council flats all over Europe, losing interest in the things they were trained to view as important.

And as soon as I stopped trying to write, I couldn’t prevent the flow. It was me, but not me. I hoped it was me, but it wasn’t the me I was supposed to be... the me in thinking mode. But it was the me whose thoughts were mine. It was no wonder the brain had just about been made illegal in modern societies, I mused. As the words came to me, I laughed uncontrollably, obscuring most of the

message, but I can still dredge up some of the elements from time to time. It had to be outlawed, what with all those receptors just waiting to be activated by plants unknown, not to mention the glories of DMT and random poppies. It was unrealistic to expect people to be given full reign on ultimate reality, or any reality. While they were pissing and moaning about social issues and taxes, their very consciousness was being hijacked from right over their noses. It was classic bait and switch, and it only took a few trinkets and gadgets to keep them believing.

As the beautiful gold began to wear off, I peeled my carcass from the roof and made my way below deck for a rest, deluding myself that they would never get me. At least I was aware enough to laugh myself into the living room. “No man, no organization, no religion,” I silently ranted as I loaded a cube of Green Gold into a hubbly bubbly. “Only Nature;” because that’s what it all belongs to, and that’s what informs me of anything and everything worth anything.

As the blariness parted from my eyes, I tried to focus on the pieces of paper where I hoped I’d at least scribbled the outline of the book I was willing myself to start. All I could make out were coded messages, and I hadn’t a clue what they meant. Maybe it was a cypher. I laughed thinking of how I logged the code in my mind while in the midst of a golden haze. Just as I thought I had a grasp on the misguidedly random code, I recognized Chamban symbols that I’d soberly memorized, even though they had been defunct for hundreds of years. It was a swirling cycle of trying to make sense of where the actual notes began and my simian fascination with ancient symbols finished. The only sure-fire element of the book’s notes that remained was the recurring drops at inopportune places trying to induce the writer to commit suicide. That couldn’t be healthy, I concluded. I decided if I were to avoid the trap of carefully assimilating flow for months only to see it all unravel after a week back in the West, I was going to need to forcibly shift to a new location.

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I could feel it as soon as I got off the bus. The two-day journey was still shimmering in my mind, through gorges, passes

and switchbacks of extraordinary beauty. Its danger registered as the remnants of the golden haze exited my mindrack. I could still trace the passage from the icy bottle green heights of Sonnamarg through the hazy lime drop into a valley of beauty so deep that not even the encroaching spectre of cola brands fluttering along roadside café awnings could detract from it. And then climbing around hairpin bends, the bus driver using every inch of the road, as well as some cartoonish air routes, to wrangle his beast of a dilapidated vehicle over the pass into Zaskar. Suddenly, the arid copper hues of a different land had come upon me. And the people were wildly different: broad faces with beautifully natural smiles, stunning nectarine skin wrinkled perfectly by an unyielding Sun; rain rarely reached this corner of the Great Mountains. As they loaded their wares, and sometimes sheep or chicken, onto the bus, more amused at the sight of a random whitey than the circus they were joining, a communal camaraderie overflowed. With only one bus per day passing by, there was no time for rules. And then the rise and fall to Lamayuru was up ahead. I recollected something final yet timeless about that stretch, with a mythic palatial temple perched high in the scene, viewing everything around, from Kashmir on one side to the hidden valleys of Zaskar on the other and back up towards the ancient riverside villages of the Indus, where I was heading to glimpse the fabled Aryan tribes who were rumoured to be ancestors of the remnants of Sikander's armies.

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The locals' shuffling carried me towards a bus not much bigger than a washing machine, and I felt the addicting gene taunting me as I pushed my body towards the ultimate in no-drug areas; the road to Skurbuchan was about as remote as I was going to get. The Indus roared the bus along, harrying the rusting beast anytime it stopped to let some locals alight roadside before setting off up one of the many mountains overlooking the river. I tried to trace their steps, but they were soon away, disappearing in the overgrowth. As the bus reached its terminus, I could clearly see these people looked very different to those of just a valley away. Slightly pinched features couldn't hide the perfect symmetry of their faces: they seemed more Greek than Asian, or maybe something in-

between. I followed a rickety unmarked wooden signpost towards a hamlet of about ten abodes, all made from decaying wood. Within minutes, I was ushered towards the biggest of the houses by a man in his twenties; it served as his family home as well as a guesthouse. Inside, he pointed towards a rattan mat as he lit a small kerosene heater. Smiling as he dropped sugar into teacups, I couldn't hold out. "So, are your people related to Alexander the Great? You know... that Greek dude? "

He smiled and shook his head. "No, my people are Aryan, but we came from the other side of these mountains, near the Pakistan border. Just for tourism, Indian government says we are Greek, but we know. We passed our history with words."

"You look a bit Greek."

"Yes, I know. It's just as we have not mixed... stayed in our tribe."

"Mmm..." He looked at me with unerring disinterest, his crooked frown revealing the guidebook delusions of a fabulated history. "Well. I guess I'll have to put that fantasy on hold until I reach the Beas River. The locals there are all for being Greek."

As I shrugged, he laughed and beckoned me up. "I'll show you around the village," he offered.

It was unjustly redundant, its ancient purpose overshadowed and being slowly eroded by the snaking new highway lurking around every corner of the mountainside, with the Indus threatening to close the entire show down on a whim. The girls of the village played with each other's hair in between piecing together rings of flowers, while the women worked on stitching together crimson and black shoulder bags. My guide was the only man in the village. The others either had joined the army to protect their border area from five thousand years of history or spent their days hopefully milling around the bus stands of Leh and Kargil on the off-chance they'd pick up some labouring work.

The three nights I spent there are still etched in my memory. I did nothing but stare at the stars, the total lack of light pollution resulting in an astral pattern impossible to confuse. Every constellation was laid out in crystallized clarity, the empty acoustics and feint wisps of a vibrant village from the Bactrian era providing an unerring cleanse. The nothingness consumed any traces of



egotistical significance I'd attributed to my errant addiction. I was ready to hitch a ride to Leh.

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It was deathly dark as the bus shuddered to a halt. Early winter was no place for tourists in Leh. Even the callow could feel justified in their assertions of being travellers if they were throwing down in this tributary of the Silk Road. There seemed to be a blackout, or load-shedding as the Indians labelled it. And I was suddenly all alone on an icy stretch of dust road as the other passengers melted into the decrepit surroundings. I was preparing myself to go knocking on doors when a grey-robed monk carrying a lantern sidled up to me. "You come this way," he stated. I followed dutifully through a maze of alleys until I found myself being led through a small side entrance into the inner courtyard of a spacious monastery. Without explanation, the monk led me up three flights of stairs to a small room, the pride of which was a television set straight from the 1960s. Smilingly, he pushed a clunky button and slapped its side a few times, beaming when a Chinese transmission of flying monks came through. "You sleep here." He pointed to a hybrid between a table and a sofa. "I'll bring bread and water." I had struck prison gold. As soon as he had returned with hard Ladakhi bread and honey water and spent the obligatory ten minutes of asking me about my hometown, house, wife and religion, he bid me good night. I lunged at the television's off switch, laid on the floor and was soon asleep in monastic bliss.

I was full of excuses as soon as I was awoken by an ancient cleaning lady at the break of dawn. Wrenching on a tap in the corner of the room, I cupped a handful of water to splash on my brick-hard face. I had a dust hangover. With absurd sign language, I attempted to summon the monk to relay my gratitude, but I was met with dismissive grins from the cleaning lady and a group of teenage novices outside in the hallway. Shrugging and leaving a donation for the healthiest business in town, I was off, traipsing the early morning streets, trying to make sense of my surroundings. Wandering down a footpath by a tiny tributary of the mighty Indus, I spotted a rustic sign with the word "guesthouse" carved into it. I was ready for a real sleep. The cleanse had left me too clean.

The owner was right on cue, swinging the gate open as I approached. And what a face he had: it was perfect, representing where East meets West in its oval Aryan drop with wistful almond eyes, a deep golden brown offset by a thatch of silver hair. His smile was timeless and his deep voice bellowed with brotherly echoes. "Welcome, my friend." And welcome I was made. Buckets of piping hot water, promises of maps, mentions of money waved away into insignificance. By the time I had emptied two buckets over my head and felt my skin seep in the moisture, I was ready for a real bed: a double covered in leaden duvets. Within minutes I was deep in dreams, zigging and zagging through the valleys of my assumed knowledge.

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He was comfortably the nicest Christian I'd ever met. And as the only restaurant in Leh opened for dinner was a tucked-away concrete and wood darkroom barely illuminated by fluttering candles, everybody's beliefs were forced to meet. Finally, we truly were all one. Sitting there over the remnants of his Ladakhi stew, Italian curls draping his handsome face, he frowned slightly as I hurled another barb at his belief system. But he never judged, just took it all in peacefully, from time to time reiterating his own lack of belief before the fateful day of the inexplicable visitation.

"Really Luke," he implored. "I think you make a lot of sense. I felt the same way, but then I had this experience. It changed everything." The sick thing was I believed him, and he was the first person I'd ever believed peddling such a story. "I know Christians are really hard to take sometimes," he continued. "But I had an experience I can't explain in any rational way. I realized immediately I had to stop smoking dope and give my life to God." His blonde-haired Swiss girlfriend smiled knowingly by his side, squeezing his arm slightly when he mentioned Jesus. But they really were good people: well-intentioned, welcoming, well-heeled but not overwhelming. "And how do you explain all of the evidence supporting the Bible?"

"What evidence?" I asked innocently.

"There have been many stories from the Bible proven; what about the Dead Sea scrolls?"

“Hmm... well. I suppose it’s just a matter of numbers. If any religion or belief system had spent as much time and money looking for evidence, they would probably find just as much; not to mention all the falsely-attributed rationale that’s gone down.”

Gianni narrowed his eyes, shook his head once and looked crestfallen. “I’d never thought about it like that.” I felt like a complete prick, shamefully using mathematics and probability to debunk his assertion that Jesus was the real deal. I felt callous and disgusting at heart. “But you said you thought Jesus was a great man...”

“Probably, but not God. He was most likely some sort of limbic healer whose ego got out of control.”

“That’s a very strong thing to say about Jesus.”

“I’m not blaming him, but think about it. Most of the events attributed to him have been ascribed to others. And most of what he claimed about himself applies to all of us. He probably had some mad healing skills, had everyone around telling him he was God, and it went to his head. It’s easy to fall into ego traps. Anyway, he kind of was closer to God than just about anyone else. It’s only a small leap to go the whole hog.”

“But what about the resurrection?”

“You mean suicide by crucifixion... he had probably had enough of dealing with fools, day in day out.” That was the last time I ever spoke to Gianni, though he did graciously exchange addresses and invite me to his wedding. I still think of him. I suppose somewhere in my sober ramblings I felt that he was not one cut out for delusions, but now I realize that we all cling to one delusion or another, and he was a lot more compassionate in his way than most searchers will ever be.

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The last of my addicting gene was temporarily put to rest soon after passing over the highest road in the world and hurtling down to the Nubra. Treacherous hairpin bends were skimmed over, the hydraulics magically suspending us in mid-air, a bus full of the most remote Ladakhis laughing me through my nausea. Each time I peered out of the side window of that excuse of a bus, I would see evidence splayed down the mountainside of deathly crashes: jack-

knifed trucks, rotting stock and sections of metal glimmered in the snowy surrounds.

Walking across the mountain desert of the Nubra Valley, surrounded by snowy peaks spiking into the sky in a land where rain never reaches, I divorced myself from the West and found myself tucked away from the crass nonsense of the flaky East, all alone between hamlets except for the stares of Bactrian camels, lazily checking me out, shooting daggers to let me know that they could wreck me at any moment before casually assuming a look of having seen it all before.

Only two memories from that time remain crystallized within my memory banks these days. One was the travelling shaman, who also doubled as the valley's postman while looking like an electrician, bringing messages from the outside world. I recall sitting cross-legged with him as he outlined the history of the area, the ignorance of the locals to the geopolitical sensitivity of their homeland and the creeping land grabs that had occurred during recent border skirmishes. And then we exchanged knowing resignations at the actions of the powers that be, him looking at me serenely and saying, "All of these events are just markers. The important thing is to remember we are living in the past, present, and future simultaneously; this makes it a lot easier to make decisions of excellence." Those words reverberated through my cranium as I sat in the back seat of a car, framing the former residence of the royal family while exiting the southern side of Ladakh. Alongside the car, less than three feet from my window, a ripped Himalayan ibex galloped, the rising Sun reflecting from its horns and searing my eyelids.

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## **CHAPTER ELEVEN**



"Good God... is that you?"

"Yeah, it's me. Did you get the package?"

"Yeah, yes I did. It arrived the other day. Hang on a minute... I have it here somewhere." Sinclair removed an ashtray from on top of a scruffy Manila file on the windowsill behind his desk and looked up for a sign before opening and shutting his drawer loudly. The couple of whiskeys he'd had at lunchtime were clouding his memory.

"Well come on. I'm on a timer here. These phone calls are expensive. Have you looked at it yet?" Landell turned to check if the middle-aged man running the phone exchange was eavesdropping and saw him deliberately examining a notepad with pen in hand.

"Of course." Sinclair attempted to dredge up the memory of the paragraph he'd skimmed the day before while plucking his eyebrows.

"Well?"

"I like it of course, but the reader... well, you need to tell them what it's about... preferably in the first sentence."

"Not this again, Sinclair. I'm writing a book here, not regurgitating someone else's story." Landell looked over his shoulder to see if his raised voice had attracted listeners.

"Well, do you want to sell it or not?"

"I thought that was your job."

"I missed that. It's a bad line," replied Sinclair, swinging back on his chair and measuring the distance from the edge of the desk with his left leg.

"I haven't got much time left on this call. Please try to understand what I'm doing here, Sinclair. I'm attempting to reveal the entire process by charting it while writing a book."

"If that's your aim, you might as well work in a laboratory."

"Thanks Sinclair." The phone exchange boss held up two fingers, signalling that his customer was running out of his allotted time.

"Landell, you know you're my favourite writer, but you've got to get real. Things are changing. I know there have been threats before to the industry, but it really looks like things might be different this time."

"Maybe," replied Landell.

"And these new dangers are of a grandly technological nature that could stomp all of us out of existence. You've got to trust me on this."

"This all sounds to me like your remit... which reminds me: have you been promoting my book at all?"

"Of course. What do you think I'm doing over here? I've been busy planting fabricated stories in the usual social haunts, ramping up a book you haven't even written yet. The bidding war is on its way."

"Still using that same approach, Sinclair. What happened to moving with the times?"

"Infinity rules, Landell. Never forget that."

"What? Anyway, I'm almost out of money here. I'll be in touch soon." Landell facially pleaded with the phone boss, who was busy making an 'X' with his forearms.

"Don't forget your hero, Landell."

"Why do people always need a hero and a villain to believe a story? What about stories that just are?" The line went dead before a reply came through.

Landell walked onto a darkened dust road serving as the main shopping drag, kicking the cramp from his legs while shopkeepers emerged ominously, attempting to secure eye contact as he passed them by. Holding his head at an angle, he looked towards the ruins of a fort on a nearby hillock. For a few moments, he felt the first blocks of inspiration forming in his mind... why not a historical novel? Before anything resembling a plot would come to him, he felt someone gently patting his shoulder. Turning around, the unsure scholarly face of a young

man with a sorry moustache was examining him. "Where are you coming from?" he asked.

"I was just making a phone call," responded Landell automatically before grainy flashes of indignant excuses ran through his memory banks.

"No, which country sir?"

"Oh not this shit again," muttered Landell.

"What is shit sir?" The young man tilted his head, bemused at the replies he was receiving.

"Nothing." Landell turned away and scoped the seaside village for an out. "I have to go. I've got to meet a friend."

"Yes. It's good to travel with friends. What is his occupation?"

"What?" The young Indian man waited gormlessly for an answer. "He's a policeman."

"For her majesty?"

"No." Landell walked on a diagonal, quickening his step.

"What is his favourite colour? I like yellow." The man effortlessly came alongside again while Landell sniffed for clean air.

"I'm sorry. I really have to be going." Landell spun around and headed in the opposite direction.

"Is your backpack made in England? It looks export quality. I can have a drink with you and your good friend maybe."

Landell turned once more and pursed his mouth. "Listen, you need to leave me alone."

The local look nonplussed. "Why so angry, sir?"

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Landell passed the last shop on the drag and continued along a pitch black stretch of tarmac that eventually ran into the foot of a hill overlooking the beach. A drop of loneliness was soon replaced by the realization that he had to get away from Kielan, to go it alone, if he were to get anywhere. The calm

inspiration promised by the off-scene quietness was still out of reach. This enclave of Goa was yielding nothing but starlit boredom and wisps of toned-down tourist chatter. He caught another trail as the light's sheen disappeared from the road. "*Shanti shanti*," parroted a shopkeeper awkwardly to a pair of airy young white women who ascribed organic development to the clasped tourist build-up they assumed they didn't want. Here, just the right amount of Hinduism sat easily with all mod cons. Even the unwashed searchers availed of the conveniences when the tropical heat brought them to their senses.

"Cello Namaste," replied a barefoot tourist as she happily held onto an incense stick while walking gingerly.

Landell headed blindly into the darkest stretch of the village. Whipping around the hill's circumference, he soon realized he'd lost track of the dust road leading back to his room. Voices seemed to be emanating from the far side of the hill, towards the beach, partially lifting him from his thought-tracing back to the rudiments of the London life he was supposed to be conquering. Images of sunny loft apartments on the Fulham side of Chiswick, within walking distance of uninhabited parks and lesser seen streets that once housed barely remembered artists, occupied his meanderings. Carefree ambles to some imagined bakery on Saturday mornings with just the right type of hangover, fuelled by a steady flow of critical praise and leftfield pop sensibility, placed him in the right frame of mind to sustain shallow yet eerily meaningful relationships with those around him who had yet to be around him. Feeling ashamed at associating such aims with happiness, Landell dwelled on what it was that was supposed to bring him peace, channelling the studied cool of surreptitiously commercial artists as he went on his way. Only the rings of "cello" could jerk him out of his silent musings. He had inadvertently stumbled into the backside of some gathering on the far-side of the beach.

"Cello. I'm going to the shop to get some chocolate before it closes." Landell was separated from the troupe by a rocky mound no higher than six feet.



“We can smoke and chill after ten. The police usually don’t cross these rocks at night; it’s too dangerous without torches.”

Landell stopped walking to avoid any underfoot crackling and waited for the voices to pass. As soon as they were out of earshot, he continued in the direction from where they had come. Arriving at the end of a narrow trail, he spotted a crude arrangement of rocks leading down to a corrugated metal roof supported by a phalanx of logs and tree stumps. A sole coconut tree dejectedly pointed out past a rocky shoreline towards a blackened sea. An Indian voice interspersed with tinny Western laughter directed Landell’s eyes towards a candlelit table. This clump of real estate had assumed just the right amount of projected freedom, the end of a line of steps gradually leaving the empty heart of the beachfront with its hawkers and open access. The people he heard were struggling with their vernacular, but Landell still held out, hoping that others were sitting silently in understanding. Away from the moneyed tourists, a zone had been eked out, a place worth loitering around until the inevitable tide arrived and subsumed it in good time for everyone involved to get paid off.

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The midday sun was beating against his shins as the rest of Landell’s body took shelter under the shade of a plastic canopy jutting out from Rosie’s Café. An unyielding detachment was beginning to creep over him, leaving him outside the mindset he thought he’d been trying to locate. Unsure as to whether he wanted to get immersed into this off-scene beach scene, but unable to pull back and observe it, Landell felt the urge to take his party elsewhere, fleeting thoughts informing him that it was away from the crowd where he might find something to latch onto. Ruminating on his options while guiltily ordering another banana pancake, the intonation of an embittered Indian electrician began to register in his ear. “This

computer invention will just obscure reality, not reveal it. It will simply be another trap of Western consumerism.” Landell glanced at a fifty-year old man examining the tip of a screwdriver while his apprentice fiddled with a nest of Christmas lights. “It will confuse people, keep them in the dark and make it easier to control them.”

A golden Californian in a kaleidoscopic poncho rolled back his chair and stood up, earnestly swallowing the remnants of a samosa before addressing the world-weary electrician. “Technology can and will bring forth, helping us to interface with the great truths of time immemorial,” he proclaimed. The electrician held his hand out with all of his fingertips touching each other before suddenly springing it open in a gesture of dismissal. As the Californian cleared his throat, an Italian suggested playing a techno tape he’d made at a full moon party. Within five bars, Landell had shovelled the remainder of the banana pancake down and paid his bill, still chewing as he walked outside.

The heat set upon him like a wave of dissent, blasting his temples as he forced his body out of earshot of the techno pagans. The promise of shade beckoned him from a bottle green awning across the street: a small café backed onto a refuge for stray cows and trash. Landell quickly made his way under the cover in search of quiet and plonked his frame down on a rickety bamboo chair. Looking around for service, he saw two encrusted white tourists sprawling on the floor with a lonely chess board off to the side. They were chuntering in barely audible English. “He was a good man, just a bit different,” the longer of the two drawled.

“He did many bad things,” replied a strong Indian voice from behind a curtain separating the kitchen area from the café floor. A man of about forty with two lazy eyes emerged from behind the partition.

Landell caught his gaze. “Do you have a menu?”

“Yes, one minute sir.” The proprietor hobbled towards his customer, scratching his belly as he went before handing over a

plastic covered sheet of paper. He weakly pointed to the main course section of the menu.

"Yeh, I guess he did many bad things. You're right," agreed the longer tourist.

"Just an orange juice, please," stated Landell. "No added water."

"Acha." The Indian man curled his lip and barked towards the two prone tourists. "He was never a good man... always around here trying to take advantage of young, innocent tourists."

"Yeh, you're right," said the shorter tourist, speaking for the first time since Landell had arrived.

"She was a sweet girl, a good person," added his friend as they both sat up and looked around to view the intruder.

"She was a silly slut," asserted the lazy-eyed proprietor. "And that's why she's dead now."

"Yeh, I guess she was a bit silly," the two replied in unison. "But maybe she's not dead... we don't know for sure."

"When people disappear from that ashram, they're as good as dead," replied the café's owner while digging his hands into a display of yellow oranges.

"Yeh, but what about the secret ashram that is only reachable by river and a two-day trek," suggested the longer tourist.

"That place only exists in the imagination of silly hippies," barked the café owner before hobbling back behind the curtain to squeeze out an orange juice.

"Yeh, we thought that too," replied the tourists in unison.

Landell closed his eyes and ran through the levels he'd witnessed over the previous few days, from the full-on new arrivals all the way up to the untouchable cashed-up package tourists. He baulked at the thought of peeling all the way back to Square One, admitting to himself he was nowhere near ready to marry a physical endurance test to a mental one. A feeling of empty disappointment almost instantly attached itself to memories of lost relationships. Accepting the undying trails of

pain from failed unions with women he once thought he'd loved was standard, but still feeling punctures to his heart from girls who had run over his ego and left him wondering what could have been made him question any pretence he had of knowing anything.

Unable to make a decision, Landell found himself shuffling through the dappled shady areas by the side of the road towards the annex where he was staying. The spectre of Buddhism settled in his mind as waves of heat interrupted any shade he could locate. The appeal of a stronger, somehow more resolute philosophy began to fade as he ran through the train timetable he'd memorized the previous afternoon. Ploughing through the Jain country of Karnataka was hardly an eightfold path to enlightenment, but the decision had already been made for him. As a dehydration-induced headache crept up from the base of his skull, Landell tried to convince himself that changing horses mid-stream might well be a sign of evolution, a portent of doing the best with the understanding you have. But his writer's head couldn't discount that it was simply an ovine sign of conveniently forgetting carefully constructed belief systems to row along with whatever's in. Or maybe his dialectical over-analysis of group movements was just another more convoluted march towards death... just yearning for a thing you don't know how to approach. Landell began to feel himself sliding.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE



High up in the pine-forested mountains looking down on the resort town of Manali, I felt the unmissable shining trails that once flowed from a nearby source. Fifteen miles below, I could see the sheaths of light promising the bored upland villagers some action, which was only a pale ghost of what had once come from the very villages they sought to escape. It was in these wooded outposts where I began to feel awake, if only in frazzled alertness; it would be down deeper valleys, past the eastern borders of Himachal, where it would meld into treks of illumination while others, unbeknownst to themselves, expounded nonsense about communal trips.

And it was while disjointedly flailing down pine-needle beds with promises of hook-ups from village wide-boys ringing in my ears that I ploughed straight into a wiry old-looking young man with lucid eyes and crinkled bronze skin wearing an unlikely denim jacket and flip flops. He went straight for the jugular. “Are you meditating in the forest, mannn?” he enquired. I stared directly at him.

I had no idea where such a face came from; it could have been from any one of fifty countries. “Just taking a walk,” I lied.

“Walking to Manali?” His examination of me seemed too brazen for someone preparing to throw down.

“Why the questions, boss?”

“I’m sorry friend. It’s just impossible to see a tourist this side.”

“Maybe I’m not a tourist.”

“Ah, you are a real sadhu,” he exclaimed while nodding his head knowingly.

“There are no real sadhus,” I replied blithely.

“You are right. You should never believe what the other prophets say, or do.” He produced a sorry looking cigarette from his jacket pocket.

“Then why should I believe what you’re telling me, boss?”

“Because you would be a silly coward not to. And a man walking alone in these forests is not silly, and not a coward.”

“I might surprise you.” I smiled and shook my head as he held a cigarette box out to me.

“Take care then,” he replied. “And be careful of all the fake sadhus down Manali side.”

And then he was gone, leaving me to consider his age and somehow conclude that most old people are morons but the intelligent ones are in a different realm to anything you’re likely to be prepared for. I was struggling to swallow my latest ignorant conclusion when I latched onto the intelligence of beauty and the beauty of intelligence. The overriding ambition of men to control women dissipated into nothingness in the face of how truly beautiful women still mesmerized men with little more effort than that needed to raise an eyebrow, controlling them with unforgiving ease. That was all I could manage to get to grips with, but it was enough to justify another few hours bouncing through the pines.

The days had comfortably merged into weeks, and almost all traces of my predilection to addiction had vanished, but naturally, they could never completely disappear or I wouldn’t have been alive. And the further the trails melted into the primordial distance, the clearer the shadow sat in the forefront of my thoughts, mocking me slyly as each peak I scaled was met with new theatres of impossible heights. It was time to swoop down to Manali. I knew this was going to have to be a smash and grab, or I’d be hurled into a shallow space I didn’t want to get stuck in.

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“Not this shit again,” I thought, as some drawling Euro-mystic explained that Manali wasn’t where it was at anymore. If you really wanted to see the authentic free-thinking of the post-1960s reawakening you would have to take a rickshaw, or ideally walk, eight kilometres to the unspoiled holy village of Shivast, tucked away at the foot of a natural hot spring, looking down on Manali. I emitted a disappointed groan as I convinced myself to check out the latest greatest place just past the destination that was supposed to be the ultimate source but had somehow lost its way in between word coming back and my arriving there. Anyway, I wasn’t prepared to invest two hours on a walking pilgrimage in the deceptively searing mountain Sun.

Levering my frame out from behind the rickshaw driver, I palmed him a red note and scoped the village of Shivast, the last bastion of Krishna consciousness in these parts. It was a dusty confluence, with two ramshackle guesthouses forming the centre of the dwelling; an etched signpost pointed to a dusty path leading to the obligatory Shanti Lodge. There was no one around. Walking up a steep hill, I spotted an ugly concrete outhouse, which was apparently the private spring. The natural spring was a mud-caked mire, with remnants of army clothing populating its perimeter. Ambling back down the hill, disappointed in my curiosity, a gold-turbaned chocolate-skinned wiry sadhu emerged from behind a tree and ushered me towards a tiny cottage. I could feel the Marley off him, and his gimlet eyes had obviously sorted through many a searching tourist in the past. "I am the ganga man. People told you about me," he announced triumphantly.

"Whathya got?"

"Come my friend."

And did he have it. The Malana seemed overpriced until I felt a triple chillum hit invading every sinew of my body. This shit was real. I was wide open. I knew I was on the way down as the Bob Marley colour print on the otherwise bare wall across from the makeshift bed I was perched on began to slide in and out of focus. My bargaining powers took a nosedive as the sadhu dealer mentioned some extortionate number. I decided that getting stiffed for a hundred rupees was preferable to lapsing into a power nap and having a pocketful of travellers cheques relieved from my person. Hitting both sides of the door frame on my way out, with rings of "come again" in my ears, I immediately felt myself baking in the early afternoon Sun, over-sensitized to the nth degree, searching frantically for any sign of an auto-rickshaw to take me back to the safety of a grubby guesthouse bed. The only memory I carried into the next day was heroically struggling to insert a cassette into my Walkman to blast the incessant Marleyisms out of my mindrack.

Fifteen hours of deep dreaming carried me through to dawn. As soon as I woke up I realised a strange crack through my brain cells needed to be balanced. A begrudgingly small morning chillum of Malana cream had my head exactly where I wanted it as I stumbled out of my room and into the guesthouse garden to check

the rising Sun and a tourist arguing with the guesthouse owner's cousin as to whether Californian Buddhism or Rastafarianism was the optimum route, both oblivious to their status. "It's about one love... that means everybody." A suspiciously soft-faced European fingered his dreadlocks as his companion readied himself to respond.

"Yeh, but it's about the path... like Buddha said. All things disappear. Love leads to samsara." The young Californian leaned back in a plastic white chair and held his chillum up to the Sun before producing a shoelace from a trouser pocket and feeding it through the pipe's opening. With one end of the lace jammed between his teeth and the other held between the thumb and index finger of his left hand, he began to ceremoniously clean it. I had seen enough.

I traipsed down the hill from above Old Manali to the new town to see what angles were being laid down by the various businesses. The outer limits of the new town had just come into view when I was accosted by a lean man probably in his fifties, eyes blazing like those of a reformed alcoholic, determined to lay his knowledge on me but scornful with it. "All these spiritual tourists and local gurus are simply elevating their social status. Did you know that?"

"I hadn't really thought about it." I'd foolishly assumed I would be clear to nip into town at half seven in the morning.

"Yes. And way before the dawn of realization rises on these innocents, they are already being controlled from afar. By forces they don't understand." This bloke's English was fucking impeccable. I began to think he was an original, somehow cast adrift from the dissipating remnants of new age life, and like a wolf in the night, coming down from the hills to warn any newly arrived explorers of the great rig that has been put in place. "You see mate," he continued with echoes of West London. "People get disconnected from their communities and feel worse seeing others get ahead. They're wide open to their weak side. Instead of thinking for themselves and realizing that all they are is the quality of their thoughts, they feel marginalized, excluded by the traditional religions. And they will be marginalized by any means, having their sense of worth degraded in the process."



“You could well be right.” I was mesmerized by his shredded Western jeans.

“You know I am.” He nodded ominously as I felt more lucky than bothered that I’d somehow managed to bump into an old-timer coming back down from decades in the hills at precisely the moment he was ready to issue forth these findings.

“Well, it was nice meeting you. I’ve got to meet someone downtown.”

“Take care, my friend.”

He’d left me cold, his words spiralling around my skull, staking their claim to be the way for that day. It would need something strong to get them out of my thoughts, and it arrived almost immediately, right beside the bus stand. As I strolled by, the overnight bus pulled up and among the traders and aspiring businessmen, two tourists stepped down: one a tearfully tired pretty college type who looked like she’d just had her soul savaged, the other a technically handsome yet strangely unattractive thirty-year old dark-haired, side-parted, designer travel-wear clothed Londoner. “Here we go,” he announced. “Time to plough through another day of bullshit here.” His voice was middle-class and canorous.

“Then why don’t you just go home to London if that’s how you feel,” responded the young woman.

“To that reptilian shitstorm of an excuse for civilization. Are you joking?”

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Those five days in Manali were on countdown from the off. I knew I had to get out before I ended up like the lost souls who rolled up there for a pit stop in between temple towns only to spend six weeks getting blasted at premium prices. As I stood at the bus stand determined to take the first ride not suicidally overloaded with locals, I caught sight of the chestnut mane of a woman I’d blearily locked onto while out of it the previous night at the latest cool bar in town, the one with the randomly downbeat music and English proprietors hiding out back and not so secretly doing pharmaceutical cocaine straight from the green fields of Pakistan. I had no idea how long time had warped while I stared at her; I was still trying to gauge why I’d perceived her to be different to every

other face I'd seen that night. She had the goods, however good-looking she was. As I elbowed some space for myself, she nodded. I returned it sideways, native style, and pointed to the bus I was about to jump aboard. She walked towards me, sunglasses perched on her head. "I think I owe you an apology," I began.

"Oh why's that?"

I swung my rucksack through an open window and onto the unoccupied back seat and looked in her rippled eyes, jaded by having to see too much. "I think in my caned state last night I was staring at you."

"Oh, so you're blaming the medicine."

"Only for the clumsy pauses." She smiled and asked me why I was going to Naggar. When I told her I didn't know where I was going, she beamed and said that'd probably result in us bumping into each other again. I sat on the back seat with the peaceful feeling of knowing that you'd just met a woman who you'd always feel totally natural thinking about and yet never be with. As the bus pulled away, I peered out the back window and saw her dispensing with hawkers like Mother Nature deselecting a redundant species.

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I had somehow convinced myself that sticking to caning nuggets of Malana from my fake credit card holder was going to put me in just the right place to continue penning my sorry scrawl of a book. In a beautifully darkened room in the outskirts of Naggar on the road to the village responsible for my latest lurch into plant life, I sprawled on a king-sized wooden bed, my brain blocked to fuck, imagining my words exploding like stars and spreading trails through infinity but instead swallowing huge chunks of time between hits, two-hour blocks of circuitous reminiscing flitting by like cats eyes on a motorway.

And I lay there as alone as can be, save the occasional tribute to the real shaman I was dreaming up. I realized the beauty of getting caned alone for the purity of it, no crenelated interactions with fellow druggies, smitten by their own deluded secret associations. And beyond the waves of spliced memories, bars of nearly forgotten music piecing thoughts together, I delved and dropped until any grasping at future bliss was as irrelevant as all the

transient memories of life back home that I'd designated as problems. And it was there, kneading my eyes with the balls of my hands, that I felt the interface with plants registering in my pineal and flowing right through me: the it in it was the same as the view in DMT and as the you in me.

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Walking down the only track in the valley in search of the roadhead to Malana, I felt from the surrounding countryside more than the usual beauty of sun-spangled mountain scenery. There was something else in the ley of the land, something Roerich had felt less than a century before me. And as I was ushered into a gallery constructed in his honour, perched above an apple green chasm, and relieved of enough cash to feed a local for a week, I saw something of the surroundings in the hanging paintings. Drifting from room to room in a haze, I tried to figure out how an exhibition had been constructed around four paintings. They had jammed an unrelated early twentieth century car driven by a neighbour into the middle of the house, hopefully diverting attention from the fact that four pictures hardly constituted a gallery. But it's all about quality, and there was something in those sub-Himalayan pastels, enough to keep me occupied as I continued on the road to Sikander's supposed descendants. Around another bend of sun-dappled dirt road with mountains all around me, blocking any view of what lay ahead, I was suddenly beckoned with a beaming namaste. I turned to see two snaggle-toothed women holding baskets and smiling ferociously, flanking a sitting man, smoking merrily and miles away from work. I held my hand up and smiled. They urgently motioned me towards them. "Uncle come," they shouted mysteriously. "Resting."

And that was about all the English they possessed between the three of them. But communication was as easy as with a cherished brother, as the man passed his banana leaf *charas* mash-up my way. The two women, balancing baskets of millet on their hips, giggled as I tried to regulate the sharp intake. The man, now appearing younger, rubbed his moustache and repeated "charas," eyes widening with each successive utterance. It took five or six hits before I realized he might have been suggesting business. I showed

my interest with a steady nod; he said “tomorrow.” I motioned up the mountain and whispered “Malana.” He replied “Naggar Cream.” I stood up while I could. He jammed a nugget of charas into my hand and smiled: “For journey.” And that’s the way the way once was.

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I steered my weary legs away from the dirt track to Malana, five miles short of one of the last bastions of Gandharan blood. Around a spur to the east, I’d spotted a wooded area jutting out from the side of the mountain on the far side of which the village of Malana was perched. Out of my frontal thoughts, I was drawn towards it, scrambling sideways over a patch of scrub before straightening up as I entered the silvery chocolate forest, ferns crunching under my feet and wisps of purely chilled oxygen emanating from the trees. Within moments, I was feeling flutey, with exhalations billowing softly around my face, the woods dragging me in deeper and deeper. The respite I’d anticipated was quickly turning into a new thing. Looking around, there was no sign of an out: continuing diagonally downwards would leave me on the wrong side of the trail to Malana; looping around would have me deep in a maze of trees. The imagined circular symmetry of these woods was beginning to fade; going back on yourself as a means to insure against making too much progress was never a good idea, especially deep in the hills of the Bon.

I gave myself an hour of whirling like a dervish, entangled in fleeting thoughts of rivulets, from suburban London to the latticed field of Leh, never settling on a pattern but feeling one somewhere beyond my grasp. Bereft of anything tangible in the glimmering copse I found myself in, switching addiction to clocking junctures between mellow sunbeams and mossy bark fragments, I realized the only learning worthwhile was away from the heavily trodden areas my Western brothers and sisters frequented. “You should be with your countrymen,” I shouted in my hammiest Indian accent.

I was years away from the mental mapping of pre-tourists logging hours and checking boxes before they designated rigid timeframes and locations for unwinding, loathe to read anything challenging as they were trying to relax... as if they had a better

window. I fractured that thought before I found myself logging, checking, ticking and fucking my way through a different set of cues, however more natural they may be. Putting my head down, I closed my eyes and bludgeoned my way in a straight line, upwards and out of the woods. When I opened them I saw the outskirts of Malana.

I waited to be invited into the village; anything else would have been social suicide, and I wasn't mentally in a place to fuck around with ancestors of Alexander's armies. Within fifteen minutes, an oval-faced copper-coloured woman in her thirties beckoned me across the threshold. I followed her at a few paces down the main drag, before she turned towards a squalid laneway, a hideaway or a safe haven of rejection; none of the options redirected me. She pointed to a white stone and wooden windowed cottage. It must have been the guesthouse. As I thanked her in standard Hindi, she placed two fingers to her lips and in a guttural tone said "smokey." I nodded and smiled, touched by the thought that the passage of herb-keepers had not been interrupted in this kept culture. The women had the knowledge, and any danger that realization contained was welcome.

It was just as well there was little to do except go deeper and deeper into the cannabinoid hinterland of Malana mind because any other interest would have probably kept me there for months instead of the week I spent nailed to my bedpost. There was also the matter of the sicknesses lurking around every corner, ones I could not specifically identify but I could feel nonetheless: rickets, lumbago, goitre and all those other diseases that were once common. I even managed to convince myself I had scurvy but wasn't sure whether that vitamin deficiency had to be triggered by sea air. And then there was the reality that no outsiders were going to be getting down with the locals, no primordial connections through shared meals or night-time confabulations. We were welcome, and they were patient with us; but it was stay and smoke and then be on your way, and it became clear that my way was not their way, and their ancient way was not the way even if it contained many elements of what you would want to be the way. It's so easy to take a wrong turn, or drift down a creek where you can see the way but not be with it.

And as I walked out of the village with a bow, refusing the offer of a shared trek with a steely-eyed Spanish brown addict, I could only wonder if it's necessary to have other minds around you to realize the best in yourself and keep on evolving. Or is the random factor so significant that it outweighs all other things on the road. I never arrived at a conclusion as I bounded diagonally down the mountainside out of Malana district and towards the Beas River, but I was more determined than ever to mountain jump alone, and not just in the meditation I'd stopped doing.

"Never confuse art with codified behaviour." I had no idea where this shit was coming from. I'd thought art was the furthest thing from my mind as I larked around the foothills of the holy mountains. Collapsing down the gradients from lack of nutrition, I kept my eyes peeled for living flows, even desolate buildings that had yet to be designated as tourist structures... anything that was in effect, no matter how weak it was. I couldn't form a single coherent thought in my mind, and yet I'd never been more lucid.

It was easy for Nature to remind me at every turn along the trail that here was reality and that the urban life I was still deferring to was simply a set of games. But that was standard for the goddess in Nature to know, and she could see it in city boys as easily as she could see it deep in the Himalaya. She grew up in it and didn't have the problem of sifting through manmade overlays to get to the source. As I felt her warmth all around me, I wanted to excuse my clumsiness with a big self-indignant "fuck you," but she felt too good. And it was walking down those slopes, away from Kasol and towards Mannikaran that I realized I had slipped and tripped smack into my *laghu*, that which had always been there no matter how hard I tried to rub it out: the laghu in the light of Nature, the way around the Atman's play.

Darkness began to settle on the boughs of the surrounding trees as the charcoal smell of settlement reached my senses. I was now barely a mile outside of Mannikaran; the upper reaches of its infamous temple were within sight. And it was the pure depravity of the carvings in bas reliefs I'd pictured which probably weren't even there that somehow kicked me into the folly of partying on hallucinogens if you're looking for the light. No, those drugs are ones that you should take alone, preferably in a darkened room; they simply feel wrong in company, but never when alone. And as I

mulled over the veracity of my latest find, happy with its truth, I came to the one clear conclusion that stayed with me long after the journey was over: I have no interest in my own opinions, and I usually don't agree with them.

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If you see street vendors spooning clumpy rice into small bowls on the banks of the Parvati, don't turn your nose up at them with misguided tourist paranoia. Those locals are selling *kir*, a sweet rice delicacy somewhat close to English rice pudding, but less sloppy and infused with cardamom and maybe even cinnamon. In an ocean of savoury food, with the occasional sickly sweet marzipan dessert, it really is something special, particularly on chilly autumnal nights under the stars of India. I had slung my bag into a hovel of a guesthouse, saving my dwindling budget for spring baths and solid, and was steadily demolishing my second bowl of kir while looking up at the stars, when he reappeared: the Londoner who I'd seen savaging the debutante at the bus station. He approached me nodding assertively. "Alright man. What's that you're eating?" he enquired with a heavy exhalation.

"This is kir. You should give it a go."

He puffed, his ruddy cheeks set in a face that seemed to be swimming in stress and impending jowliness. Tilting his head while inspecting the remnants of the bowl I was holding limply, he replied, "Can I get a taste?"

"Sure... finish it off. That was my second bowl, anyway." He pawed at it tentatively, swallowing with mistrust, before looking point blank at me, his unkempt eyebrows betraying a creeping desperation. I smiled, strangely touched by the combination of financial reckoning and schoolboy competitiveness contained in his plaintive appeal. "There you go. Not bad, heh?"

"Yeah, thanks mate." He shuffled uneasily as I motioned to leave. I guessed what was coming next. "Do you know where I can get some gear around here?"

I inhaled dramatically as if I'd been tasked with an impossible mission. He looked crestfallen. "Well, I don't know; I just got here a couple of hours ago. But if I were you, I'd look out for the usual

suspects: hippies, holy men or the richest-looking businessman in town.”

“Fucking hippies... I can’t stand them,” he blurted. “They’re so full of shit, with all their peace and love crap. Born innocent, corrupted by society: what a load of bollox. They don’t have a fucking clue.”

“They’re not all bad,” I fudged. “And some of them have good gear.”

“I’d rather not have to listen to their selfish drivel... dirty fuckers.”

I laughed and rooted in my pocket for a chunk of solid to calm him down. As I pulled it out, he looked at me in a brotherly way. “I didn’t mean to offend you. You seem cool.”

I laughed again and palmed a thumbnail-sized square of Malana’s finest into his hand. “Here, this will tide you over. If you locate anything decent, let me know.” I walked away backwards saluting him, as he fingered his unknown bounty quizzically.

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It’s usually on the days when I don’t smoke much that weird shit happens, so I ruminated suspiciously on the glimpse I caught of her at the junction of two laneways in the back alleys of the temple area. Twilight was hanging when her shape flitted by, obscured by the furtive smoking of embittered street traders. That swaying glimpse stayed with me for most of the night, even as I frantically loaded cold water into the private spa perpetually refilling itself with absurdly hot spring water, directly from the bubbling mud flats of the River Parvati. Like a panicked homeowner bucketing water onto a house fire, I began to zone out until my calves felt the divine sensation of the ideal temperature. I slowed my pace and looked around to see where I’d placed the chillum. Within moments, I was spread-eagled on the tiled floor of a ten-by-ten bath, water gushing through my legs like a broken hydrant, smoke billowing from my tilted head like a moody chimney. The previous few days raced through my synapses, an incongruous comfort that I was out of the danger presented by the hedonism of Manali even though I was caning much harder for more hours in a day and surrounded by plants everywhere at the end of the Parvati road. I decided right



there, as bullets of spring water ripped around my face, that I was close enough to the far side of my current Venn to circle my way straight through and push down the mountain trails leading to the south-eastern reaches of Himachal and the seldom walked Nepalese border region. With a sense of accomplishment, I let the snippets of alley memories of Mannikaran, and the two Londoners I'd witnessed that day, elide through my thoughts while I pasted myself with the currents of Malana's nature.

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I ventured out with no idea of the time, hoping there'd be some sort of shop open. The whistling quiet of night time had me thinking it was around three in the morning, but the bug-eyed appearance of an alabaster-skinned Brahmin from behind a doorway gave me hope I'd find something open. I pointed at an imaginary watch on my wrist; he curled his lip up and ducked behind a reddish door. I kept on walking, randomly turning through the alleys, trying to keep track of the overbearing presence of the main temple. A candlelight beckoning from the far end of an alley drew me towards hanging strings of household products. This was as good as it was going to get at that time of night, whatever time that was.

An unshaven man of about forty looked at me wearily, seemingly beaten down by his need to make ends meet, eying me up in a vending calculation. Part of me didn't want to disappoint him as I looked curiously through his glass cabinet of wares, a novice attempt at providing security for his more expensive items, the ones usually emblazoned with the always amusing "export quality" stamp. Tapping the glass cover and screwing my finger around childishly, I managed to have him retrieve a softening bar of chocolate, an industrially dry tube of "digestion" biscuits and a lonely packet of rolling papers. From the hanging strings, I plucked a few sachets of shampoo while pitying a sick-looking banana. With a sense of tired adventure, I pointed to a coconut, wondering how I was going to crack it open in the dead of night, envisaging myself banging it with a chillum before tempestuously hurling it against the walls of the room I was staying in. As the shopkeeper entered numbers into his calculator for the third time, I felt a gentle tap on

my shoulder. Turing with visions of midnight beggars and shady holy men running through my mind, it was her. "Hi," I greeted bleakly.

"We meet again." She smiled as she said it, revealing a set of symmetrical if eerily mammalian teeth, set off by her tanned skin. She had that blonde hair I associated with rich Italians and spewy Regent Street shoppers.

"Do you have any idea what time it is?" I asked, without trying to reveal myself.

"No." She smiled and it began.

That was when asking someone back to your place for a smoke was as non-loaded an invitation as you could imagine. Or maybe it was the location. There weren't any reptilian seducers with enough commitment to haul their asses all the way to Mannikaran on the off-chance they'd be able to locate a lone star. It was all about the smoke except it wasn't, or at least it was a common bond that suggested a way of communication with unspoken transparency; and this lent some foundation to trusting people who in the game-playing world it would seem ridiculous to believe at close quarters. And there was certainly an understanding as we monosyllabically passed chillums and a fake credit-card holder back and forth in my barren room.

She was beautiful in a resigned way. There was nothing naïve about her, but she wasn't quite hardened. It was so natural being with her that any slight bump in the conversation was brushed away with a shared smile, any mistrust of sharing totally irrelevant with a soul so sweet. She was exactly the type of woman I'd want to spend time with, and this lent a sadness to the knowledge that I wouldn't be dragging her through a field of mud to secure sex. It was unconsummated connections like this that would linger long in the memory, and any regret at not getting it on would quickly dissolve into itself.

Even juvenile thoughts of a world-worn snatch blunting that sexless night of close comfort were eradicated by long smoky looks of what could have been in the marketplace of a Western urban scene. As her eyes stayed shut for longer and longer intervals between smokes, I saw a peace creeping over her fine features, and this humbled me with visions of my contribution. After a while, I motioned with my head towards her sleepy eyes, mumbling that I'd

walk her back to her room. Toasted with creamy charas, she tilted her head towards mine and spoke. "I like you too much to do it like this." I smiled as pure a smile as I had in a long time.

"What do you do?" I replied cryptically.

"Well, some would call me a model or a hostess. I'd call myself a prostitute."

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The next morning, getting softly drenched by mizzle, I decided I would walk out of Parvati and deep into the mountains as soon as the weather cleared. The streets were silent as locals sheltered from the incoming rain. I made it as far as the kir vendor, but his stall was boarded shut. I loitered for a while, ignoring the amused glances from shopkeepers and random locals taking refuge from the increasing drizzle. There was definitely the hollow beauty of a hangover in the air, but I couldn't decide exactly what I was coming down from. I swallowed hard and headed back to the official tourist restaurant and its stained napkins, confident it wouldn't be closed while they still had the makings of a sub-standard thali to screw day-trippers with.

As I exited The Golden River restaurant, I walked bang in to Amanda and some reaching rich type dippily extolling the virtues of a menu taped to a cracked window. Amanda looked at me with friendly expectation, somehow bordering on rejection. The designer hippie looked at me suspiciously, seemingly offended by my non-descript navy t-shirt. Peeling away, Amanda touched my forearm. "Have you eaten?" she asked.

"Yeh... just finished." I inadvertently glanced over her shoulder.

"Any good?"

"Okay." I pulled a face indicating mediocrity. Her acquaintance was engrossed in a chain of crystal beads.

"Will you be around later?" Amanda opened her eyes widely.

"I'm going to head off as soon as the rain stops... straight into those mountains." I pointed to beyond where the road finished and a dirt trail heading towards realms tourists didn't want to test. "How about you?"

“I’m going to head back to Manali to pick up some stuff and then go to Pushkar for the camel fair.”

“Yeh, I think I should hang around with you guys.” The dizzy bint rammed herself blindly into the moment. As I narrowed my eyes towards Amanda’s, I logged how attractive marching through rain-soaked mountain terrain had suddenly become. I motioned with my thumb to signal I was heading back to my guesthouse, and Amanda followed tentatively, mouthing to her lunchmate that she would be back in a minute. That tired dipshit could have asked me what time it was, and I would have found a reason to be pissed off about it.

“So do you reckon we’ll meet again,” Amanda asked.

“Well you know India. It’s a mysterious place. Where are you heading after Pushkar?”

“Rajasthan for a bit, and then Varanasi.”

“Very nasty... that’s where I’ll see you then. I’m gonna walk straight through those mountains into Nepal and hit Varanasi somewhere in my travels. You know... anything is possible in India.” She smiled broadly, the sweet sadness of future regrets. “Are you okay for some smoke,” I offered. She nodded her head as I smiled and turned. I didn’t look back.

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As I walked out of Mannikaran and onto the now muddy mountain trail, I felt a bang on my shoulder. It was him. I still didn’t know his name.

“You going camping?” he asked with a confused look on his face.

“No mate. I’m walking to Nepal.”

“Jesus, that’s hardcore.”

“I don’t know about that. Locals do it all the time.”

“I saw you talking to that nightmare of a hippie earlier outside the restaurant. She would make anyone run for the hills. Hanging on to a dead dream, just drifting in an endless void. I swear it’s a good idea to dump as much religion and capitalism as possible on kids so they have something to work through.”

“Maybe.” I smiled

“Still, the government back home will save her... or some jumped-up fertility cult or other.”

“Do they really save anybody?” I asked. He stared at me with acceptance but a refusal to bin his creed.

“What’s your pension plan then,” he asked accusatorily.

“An overdose of brown.” I winked and headed for the hills.

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## ***CHAPTER THIRTEEN***



As his train pulled into Hospet station, Landell realized he hadn't spoken to anyone for at least four hours. It was the longest waking stretch without dialogue he'd experienced since stepping onto the blazing asphalt of Delhi airport. On cue, a painfully thin local sidled up to him, kneading his moustache as Landell searched for an exit. His urgent scanning helped him to pick up a peripheral feel for a town he'd just landed in. It seemed mildly industrious, with most people directing themselves. Any spaces around the station were soon filled by locals surreptitiously eyeing up a score in the knowledge their behaviour wasn't quiet socially acceptable. Landell felt surprisingly safe so close to the storm. Re-focusing, he noticed that ignoring his pursuer wasn't going to work.

"You need guide, sir?" Landell balked as the man offered him a cigarette, his intuition defending against the forced habit of not wanting to offend a local. Walking slowly towards a slip road by the side of the station, he spotted a stray auto-rickshaw. He moved towards it with unusual urgency, straining to blank out his pursuer, fleetingly registering the sadness of locals tainted by tourism, scrabbling for scraps of carrion. A wisp of information passed through him. The gibbering of the man still intent on serving as his guide was blocking Landell's ability to retain the nugget his pre-conscious mind was trying to deliver... something about quality dissipating from the locations where tourists frequent but remaining in those places they didn't land on. "I can be your Hampi guide, sir. I know the history very well indeed."

"Thanks, but no thanks. I don't want a guide." Landell picked up his pace.

"But how will you understand the ruins and monuments?" Landell caught the eye of a rickshaw driver, who was busy re-

positioning a plastic statue of Ganesh jammed into a space between a makeshift dashboard and his machine's visor.

"Hampi... *kitne*."

"Two hundred only," replied the rickshaw driver motioning the tourist towards his pride and joy. Landell laughed and shook his head. "One eighty best price." The would-be guide began to remonstrate with the driver, voices rising at suspiciously staged intervals. Landell had had enough. He headed back towards the main drag, where he was more likely to get a better gauge on the tourist tax he'd have to swallow.

"Pay him one hundred my friend," shouted the guide. "The correct fare is eighty. Pay him one hundred and he'll take you now." Landell felt defeated as the rickshaw pulled away with the guide crammed into the front seat beside the driver, tagging along for an unnegotiated leg of the journey. It wasn't until the rickshaw pulled up beside one of Hampi's arch bar-restaurants that Landell was informed there was only one permanently booked-out guesthouse to stay at in the town. He exhaled angrily as the driver suggested bringing him back to Hospet, where he could get a discount at a cousin's hotel. As his passenger walked towards the shade of the restaurant's canopy, the driver turned his engine off and started to mill around, preparing himself for the long con. Landell sat down, ordered a water and a Coke, and immediately felt an uneasy atmosphere even though he was the only customer. Informed by an overhead clock that it was already three, he sat in creeping disappointment, chiding his own childishness for expecting to instantly feel the connection he'd been searching for. Instead, social analysis overrode him as he imagined the evening patrons silently stratifying themselves, depending on their skin tone and mandatory accoutrements. His daily headache was now booming like thunder.

By the time the waiter was pushing at his shoulder to wake him, Landell's ankles had already been feasted on by dusk's mosquitoes. He had missed his first sunset in Hampi, the primary reason he'd gone so far out of his way. As the blur

waned, he noticed that most of the tables were occupied—the restaurant was square on to a segment of ruins visible from the town centre. The night time watchers were filing in, and Landell began to listen as his stomach complained above the din. Straight off the bat, indistinguishable people were talking about rangy subjects before they'd even order a pre-dinner cocktail. He attempted to zone out the chatter, and he'd almost got there when like a whiff of sodium, that name invaded his brain. "He is a great writer. Though, I'm not into awards either." Landell turned to locate the voice as it trailed off. Almost numb, he observed himself seething while mentally postponing his next phone call to Sinclair. "Yeah. I guess it's a bit much to criticize someone because they won an award." Landell's auditory zone couldn't escape the bookish chatter. Without seeing them, he dismissed the commentators as sheep and headed for the door, clumsily forcing a big note into a grateful waiter's nervous hands.

Outside, Landell looked around for a rickshaw, but there were none in sight. He traipsed half-heartedly to the only guesthouse in town to receive the rejection everyone had assured him would follow. Shuffling around at the corner of a dusty road, he swallowed the impending rip-off he was going to suffer at the hands of the next taxi driver he saw... worse was the feeling of being trapped in a no-man's land between the grimy travelled-out kudos of staying in Hampi and the squareness of staying in Hospet, having to manoeuvre his waking hours so as to take in the sights and spend time at a suitable hangout. The decisions were still playing with his ego as he finally rested his head on the starched pillow of a mosquito-ridden tourist hotel on the outskirts of Hospet.

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The elephant stables were the only tag that remained in Landell's mind from the plan he'd drawn up when flicking through a government brochure of the area as he sat through a



bone-crunching shortcut on the rickshaw ride back into Hampi the following morning. Belligerently poking his driver's shoulder to have him stop a few hundred yards before hitting the town, Landell wanted no part of awkward interactions with fellow lone travellers, or even worse, designer hippies in triplicate spouting unifying theories of nothingness.

He'd barely taken three steps on what he thought was a lonely road when he felt a hand on his forearm. "It is a good morning sir." Landell silently cursed his luck at finding a hawker on his way to the game, stumbling on prey as he set out. "You like Hampi, my friend?"

"I don't know yet. I'm just about to have a look around."

"Why are you not with friend?"

Landell exhaled, trying to will himself to the end game. "I want to be alone today... to walk alone."

"Ah, I understand," the middle-aged man replied. "Only you can bring what you need to your journey. You are right to avoid the touristic attractions of the town side."

"Yeh... it's not my thing." Landell was oblivious to the hook.

"Yes. They just want to sit around and relax all day. They are buying another service. It's a service we made because they wanted it. Why do they think it is authentic?"

"Your English is good."

"I was to be an English teacher, but it's impossible to get job without big baksheesh."

It was another fifteen minutes before Landell tuned back in to his aim. Now, an excuse would be trickier. A straight declaration that he'd be going it alone from the foot of a boulder-strewn incline didn't deter his would-be guide. As Landell put some distance between himself and his pursuer, he was overcome with guilt. He tried to work out its source: a sense of indoctrinated first world conditioning to be kind to the unfortunate locals of poorer countries, or maybe a postcolonial reflexive compensatory response. The man was now fifty yards beneath Landell, who was stood on a monstrous boulder

affording a view of the town below, with tourists seeming like ants on sandpaper. He felt a strange fusion of prey being slowly worn down by an unthreatening hunter and a class leader awkwardly rejecting overtures of friendship from the school nerd. Turning around, he walked on, bounding between large rocks and up towards the summit.

High above the town of Hampi and the ruins of a Vijayanagara kingdom that threatened to unify Hindustan, the mandarin sunrise was giving way to the slow burn of a Karnali autumn's day. Landell traced the landscape before him from the remains of the old city to its reaching towers and back to the Stray Temple. He imagined being alone here at sunset, the warm mauve rays feeding into that feeling of charred bliss the onset of dusk had coaxed from him in India. He'd never felt that anywhere else. There may be sunsets of note all over the globe, but only these dusty Indian ones fed lines of space back through him as he caught himself lapsing from interfacing with the prevailing solar flows.

One thali and an afternoon power nap later, Landell was back in the same spot, again alone and away from templegoers and parasitic guides, far from disappointed by the hues of dusk but feeling something he hadn't predicted. He was being swung from present-day London and the freeing fade of intangible dreams back through his childhood and once again to the final minutes of the setting sun with an insignificant sense of unease. He was set on squeezing every last copper and purple band from the dusky sky even as mosquitoes threatened. It wasn't until he felt the cool wisps of evening air around his ankles and looked down to see he could hardly make anything out that he realized he was in a race against time to scramble down the boulders before darkness fell and ankles twisted. Forcing the last amalgam of solar shade through his squinting eyes, Landell turned and began to move.

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“But I am in love with love.” They were the first words Landell overheard as he sat down on rattan mat in Shiva’s Café, a ramshackle eatery set up on the far side of a river bordering the side streets of the new town. Looking behind him, he saw a bearded eastern Mediterranean face issuing with overwrought pain. “I need a guru,” the young man added. “I need to cure this incurable malady.”

A blond, carefully coiffured man in his late twenties twisted his droopy hair with one finger while letting a blocky talisman roll in and out of his fingers and back to the palm of his right hand. “You are becoming too attached to women,” he declared.

“I am not in love with her or anyone else. It is love I love, and nothing can help me.”

The blond paused for a few moments. “You need to understand the evolution of language, where it came from and why.”

“Some man in Africa, I suppose,” suggested the bearded man.

“No. It was women who invented language of course. And do you know why?”

“To communicate?” By now, Landell had decided the beard was either Persian or Lebanese, burned by a European blonde.

“To lie more efficiently.” The blond-haired man leaned back and smiled broadly, releasing a twisted lock before calling for another chai.

“But what about the beauty of poetry, the truth it reveals. And also the great things men and women have done... they all started with words, if only in thoughts.”

“Lies,” whispered the blond as he casually opened a guide book detailing the hidden wonders of India.

Landell felt hopelessly out of place. The more he searched for the off-scene places, the more he felt like he was listing between poles. He reminded himself of his imagined role as an interloper, mining gems and trucking jewels, but simply felt too

lethargic to register anything of worth. All the verbal annoyances could not be assayed into a conclusion, or even a commentary. He needed a cold drink.

Landell's sentience could only muster a semblance of peace when the two searchers wandered off, leaving him alone and trying to avoid the gaping smile of a proprietor circling the perimeter of the cordoned-off lounge area in hope of snagging another order. As Landell rose to head back to the main drag, some words began to fuzzily fuse in his frontal lobe. "Deluded subset," he mouthed, with no idea what he was referring to.

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Landell absentmindedly kicked gravel towards the river bank as he ambled in the starlight, obsessively scoping the landscape while assuming the boatman was gone for the night. Voices came into range, and his heart leapt a little before he checked himself for his freshman excitement; Shiva's Café was open and apparently heaving. A small punt was moored to the far bank of the river, and Landell stood disconsolate momentarily, images of a missed birthday party pervading his thoughts. Milling around in indecision, he was soon pulled up. "Brother. Just a moment ... coming." He looked up to see a recently decrepit oarsman spryly skipping towards the bank, assuming he was high either on charitable chillums or the prospect of some hefty night-time white tax. "As you wish," the boatman sagely replied when asked the price. Landell took his medicine and sheepishly headed for the café with his captain in tow.

Immediately, he felt like a beaten-down novice when faced with the stratified melange of smokers on show. One or two cast slyly cool glances towards him; most studiously played their roles in their particular ring, either waiting nonplussed for their turn or ceremoniously passing chillums to their left after a cursory boom to Shiva. Like a clumsy teenager whose physicality had raced ahead of his social ability to service it, Landell

proceeded. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a table of two couples in their late thirties wearing functional clothes with no Indian garb, not a Hindu symbol in sight. They looked like geography teachers. He took the empty seat between their table and a long bench running adjacent to the main action, where mediocre hashish was being passed around with awkward ceremony.

Within a few minutes of ordering a chai and a banana pancake, Landell had established the smokers unable to maintain the requisite peppering of terminology in their chattering. They were not included in the main body of pipe passing; one or two loose cannons bounced between tables, maximizing their intake. By the time his pancake arrived, Landell had noticed three or four members of the main phalanx creating a bit of space between themselves and the rest of the body as they produced a long copper pipe. After a couple of hits each, they got up and walked past him. He overheard them murmuring of a more relaxed café farther down the river. Eating his pancake with a sense of disappointment, Landell decided to ride out his present location for the rest of that night; the other café was something to look forward to.

And at the moment when he had filed away the evening, inducing himself to reach a contrived peace with the situation, Landell was shook by the piercing voice of as direct an observer as he could have hoped to find at that riverbank gathering. The central rump of chillum puffers had just settled on the notion that people were essentially good, corrupted only by the surroundings and programming they couldn't avoid. In a naturally even, non-acerbic tone, the direct voice showed its face: average, neat-featured but devoid of any angular attraction; medium brown hair with no discernible styling; and a standard, non-threatening physique. As he raised a candle to light up a droopy spliff, he spoke from the side of his mouth. "People are basically selfish and just present a veneer of caring to delude themselves." He drew swiftly on his hashish-laden roll-up before adding, "and to fool others of course."

“But what about charity?” protested a seated smoker, with a carefully measured delivery.

“Well,” replied the medium man, examining the one side of his spliff burning up too quickly, “even if you overlook that they are doing it to further themselves or their angles, they are still a tiny percentage.”

“Have you surveyed everybody?” the seated man replied, stroking his dreadlocks over his ears.

“Just about. Besides, even if a few are on-track, it doesn’t mean the rest were always occupying the wrong spot. Hey, maybe we’re supposed to be even more selfish than we are.”

“Why do you believe that?”

“Why do you argue with mirrors?” replied the medium man before walking towards Landell while arching his eyebrows in disbelief.

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By his third day in Hampi, Landell was bemused by the assertions of random tourists that it was the only place you could stay in India where a month felt like a day. The only moments of peace he experienced were amongst isolated ruins, far from the routes mapped by those Westerners who proclaimed a pilgrimage before ticking off a couple of temples. Scaling the rocky highlands had its moments in those lulls when dusk approached and all glimpses of his peers had receded. But most of the time was about searching for those rare lulls, and navigating the hordes—both local and imported—who needed to have their words heard was wearing Landell down. He sought refuge in checking the names of the lesser visited ruins of Karnataka, but he’d have to plough through more inflicted wisdom before cracking later that day and taking a night bus to Mysore.

On his way up the hill overlooking the ruins, shy of eight in the morning, he was once again gotten by the first of the day: a self-proclaimed scholar who wanted a full explanation for

Westerners' reluctance to engage in standard relationships; and he wasn't going to stop talking to listen to any answers. Landell was already jaded just minutes after shaking loose his morning lethargy. "I'm not looking for a guide," he blurted, summoning up his last remnants of focus.

"I am not a guide." came the affectedly detached reply.

"That's good. Well enjoy your day. I'm going this way."

Landell took a sharp right, leaving himself facing an impenetrable outcrop of boulders.

"Why are you trying to avoid me, sir?" There were no words to explain why avoiding a man determined to inflict himself on you was ethically light years ahead of forcing your will on a fellow human being. "I want to share some cultural discussion." Landell felt the fight leaking from his soul. "What is it with Western people nowadays? They are not wanting proper relationships."

"Proper," drawled Landell.

"Yes, this is equatable to moral nothing. In India, we have not such moral lacking."

"Okay." Landell stubbornly quickened his step, but his acquaintance, at least ten years his senior, kept pace with ease.

"We can talk of something else if you like. I can be a kind of guru to you. Yes, Westerners like gurus. You need them," he asserted. "Yes, India is the highground, but the West has good points too... good hospitals."

"I don't know about that." Landell looked around, unable to find a path that would get him further up the mountain. He exhaled and accepted he'd have to go back on himself.

"Yes. We are an advanced civilization for thousands of years, but the West is improving." The local knuckled some dust from his pencil moustache. Landell kept on walking, trusting his surly air of defeat would gain him some space, but he was soon awoken. "Why are you tourists always looking at sunsets?"

"I'm not a tourist."

"Of course you are tourist." The guru was lighting Landell up without even trying, casually flicking insects off his linen shirt.

“Well, there aren’t many sunsets in our countries.”

“Yes, you have to carry umbrellas at all times. It is the mark of a gentleman.” The guru pondered for a moment before stuttering when finally thinking instead of simply saying. “There is an end to a life stage. Yes... that is it.”

“Maybe,” replied Landell as he looked around for a sign of shade.

“Why is tourist trying to find something here? We never cared about this place. It’s just an old place, but tourist is trying to find something that is not here; tourist must bring it with him, no?”

“Well, I suppose they are interested in the history,” replied Landell.

“Who knows the history? We have no idea. Tourists like temples, and this is a good temple business.”

“Maybe.”

“Temples have always been about business, and that’s the way it should be. It’s economics.”

“Well, you’re the guru.”

“Listen, my friend. Every tourist destination is selling some product of relaxation or bliss, but only you can bring that with you. Or you can take it anywhere. People just make the mistake of thinking the place is giving it, but it’s not. The place is just business.”

“Well, thanks for the information, but I’d better be on my way. I’ve got a pilgrimage to complete.” Landell recognised the weakness of his foundation.

“What is the hurry? The temple will not be leaving any time soon,” replied the guru with a half-cocked smile.

“No, but I will be. Bye bye.” Landell quickened his step towards where the mountain trail met a roadhead.

The ramshackle shops he remembered were nowhere to be seen. Just one drinks stand remained in view as the guru’s voice trailed behind him. “Forget about your timetable. Just operate in the now. Can you hear me, friend?” Landell raised his



hand without turning to meet the eyes of his pursuer. "Be a now machine."

"What about the past, present and future?" shouted Landell blankly.

"Be a now machine." The voice crackled as a motorbike rolled by, partially distorting its pitch. Landell swung towards the drinks stand to pick up a water for his final walk in Hampi, relieved to be free of his shadow.

Balancing himself against the stand and peering up towards the east entrance of the temple ruins, Landell heard a Scottish burr behind him. Turning slowly, he saw a sharp-featured, black-haired Scot directing a rotund drinks wallah towards the far corner of the structure and pointing towards its ceiling for some unreachable item. As the shopkeeper unsteadily extended for all he was worth, the Scot pulled a pocket camera from his money belt and quickly snapped three shots at different angles. Encouraging the shopkeeper in his quest, he jotted down a few scrawls on a notebook before jamming it into his money belt beside his camera. The Scot looked around with reflexive innocence, assuming he would see nobody. Landell's enquiring face took him slightly aback. "Aye mate. How's it going?" The Scot rocked slightly as he stood up straight.

"How's it going," replied Landell, sipping from his water bottle. "Are you some kind of researcher?"

"Aye. I'm a writer." Landell felt a strange twinge in his rib cage and tried to mask his discomfort by holding the bottle up to his face.

"What are you working on?" The drinks wallah was waiting gormlessly, holding a pack of kitchen cloths out for a promised purchase.

"It's ehh... kind of about civilizations and evolution. That sort of stuff."

"Sounds fascinating. Found out anything interesting yet?" Landell took a sharp swig from his bottle.

"I'm still working my way through my findings. I'm really interested in empirical evidence to support the theory that

locals getting fatter is the first sign of a civilization's collapse." Landell got stuck on the Scot's searing pronunciation of empirical.

"Well, good luck." Kicking the dust in front of him as he approached the temple with a bottle in hand while pooling around his thoughts of tourists lauding and Sinclair dismissively promoting him, Landell looked up to the temple's roof at a crumbling figurine contorted in celestial ecstasy before emptying a final mouthful of lukewarm water down his throat and croaking. "Fuck him. His shit is average. Mine is somewhere between good and bad, but nowhere near average."

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN



"I don't know the name of the hotel. Anyway, the operator probably wouldn't know it."

"Okay. It was just in case you gave me the wrong number." Sinclair's blasé tone crackled through the heavy receiver.

"The area code is 18352—I'm not sure if you drop the nought. Just try it both ways. I'm going to hang up now. This is costing me a fortune." Landell lay back on an irritatingly short double bed and thought about his book. It was moving away from him, and he felt he couldn't reel it back in. He considered having a one-time walk-in by a narrator to disclaim all the previous fuck-ups and get the narrative back on track. As he began to wilt, the phone rang.

"Mr. Landell. I am connecting you," an Indian accent declared.

"Is my star writer there?"

"Yep. I can hear you."

"So, you must be nearly finished by now." Landell pictured Sinclair sniggering while examining a cigar.

"I thought you wanted something special."

"Everything you write is special. I'm just saying, the sooner the better. Don't get bogged down in attempting to relay some subtle message that the readers don't care about."

"I'm trying not to think about any of that stuff." Landell pulled himself up to a sitting position and looked around for a cigarette.

"Just tell the readers what to think with a nice humble disclaimer to make them feel good about themselves."

"Really, Sinclair?"

"Sure. I have faith in your ideas, but you've got to remember that nobody is going to be interested in them unless they tally with their own."

"Okay, Sinclair." Landell felt himself veering towards the type of chatter that would convince the listener they were on the same page. It almost caused him to check his reactive dialogue. "So, what's happening in the publishing world?"

"Well, that's why I'm phoning you. You're what's happening. Wait for it..."

"Well." Landell held his breath.

"Guess who just got their criminally overlooked debut novel endorsed on a very happening chat show?"

"I knew I should have done another rewrite."

"Now, don't be cynical. A second printing is in the offing... with a proper campaign this time. We're talking window displays."

Landell's rib cage whirled with recognition. "So what's the bad news?"

"Now why do you always have to be that way?"

"Because I know you wouldn't be giving me this type of news up front without hitting me with something on the back-end. So what is it?"

"Nothing?"

"Tell me."

"Just a midget. Some nobody in a red top rag saying there was a lack of voice in your writing." Landell ran his tongue over his front teeth, pressing it up towards his nostrils. "He has no concept of what you're doing of course." Sinclair's tone had dropped to that of an obsequious salesman.

"Well," chirped Landell. "I was always happy in school when my voiceless writing could so easily reveal the fraud that was my English teacher."

"That's the spirit. Anyway, the man you think is your nemesis had your back; put that midget in his place."

"What?"

"His sales topped half a million recently." Landell gently replaced the receiver, seething at the notion of a writer having a god complex.

The sub-industrial grime of the small city of Hubli felt strangely comforting to Landell, assuring him in its aimless commerce that he'd be free to assume the guise of a visiting businessman. His only order of business was to secure a bottle of *feni* while still in the area. Cars dating from the early seventies spluttered down the main drag towards the town hall, drivers occasionally glancing at the flannelled gait of a fair-skinned visitor in search of a liquor store. Enquiring at a hotel reception was a cardinal error—Landell was immediately roped into a transaction he wasn't equipped to deal with. Deflated again as the manager led him through the darkened lounge area of what looked like a worn-out members bar, Landell found his eyes drawn to the once plush velvet seating around the perimeter of the room. By the time the hotel manager emerged blowing dust off a bottle of *feni*, he had lost any will to haggle, simply palming him a big note and nodding wearily as the cry of no change resounded in his ears.

Outside, Landell examined the late afternoon overcast sky and punted on a ramble around town while fretting over the safety of his rucksack, abandoned to the security of a train station baggage desk. For a few minutes, he watched shopkeepers standing at the front doors of their stores, soliciting business or peering sad-eyed into a slow day. Rickshaw drivers paid him no heed. Landell was beginning to believe that he was shedding what had been blighting him so far on his journey when a hand touched his arm. A physically imposing man in his sixties, somewhere between retired scholar and out-of-shape mechanic, stood before him. His English was squashed but instantly expressive. "You look a bit stressed, sir. May I ask if you need help?"

Landell turned and felt his newfound comfort slipping away. "I'm feeling good."

"Maybe you're just tired. Have you been travelling a lot?" The man's dark eyes met Landell's with soft suggestion. "That's

probably it. I suppose you're sick of people bothering you. I just wanted to make sure you were alright." Landell thought he was being reversed into a sell until he noticed the man looking across the street, seemingly more interested in a dispute brewing between a fruit seller and a policeman. "It's hard to find a balance sometimes. At least for me." Landell nodded with pursed lips. "You know," continued the man, "it's easy to fall into some levels of bad attraction." Landell found himself listening in a way he hadn't done since arriving in India. "First, some negative thought comes into your head. Then, you feel it manifesting but your reaction of panic somehow averts the danger. Finally, as you begin to relax, the big hit comes and you're fucked." The man laughed ruefully. "Sorry for the bad language."

"No, not at all. Your English is excellent," replied Landell.

"Well, I'd better be off. Time for a shave. Good luck on your journey." The man turned into the human traffic and soon disappeared, leaving Landell in the mundane industry of the day, clasp his water bottle as he strode back to the train station, an urban surliness coursing through his frame.

Retrieving his bag required much more than the ticket Landell handed to a mistrustful clerk. A ledger resembling a breezeblock was rotated towards him for signing: passport number, home address, occupation, mother's maiden name and onward destination were required. He carefully spelled out Mysore for fear of having his ticket inspected. The clerk assured him that the Mysore train was never late. Landell made for the platform, assuming he would be sitting in a stationary train for at least thirty minutes past scheduled departure time. He had no idea that this twilight wait would be the beginning of a flow that would manifest a journey covering more angles than his entire search to date had picked up on.

The first clue that something was up was when he stumbled onto the platform in search of a vendor peddling vegetable biryani, or anything substantial to supplement the packet of biscuits he had for the journey. As he stood close

enough to the carriage door to hop aboard should the train suddenly set off, the setting sun filtered through the gable end of the platform ceiling, starting him. As his eyes followed the rays, subconsciously trying to land on the mandarin embers of glow lighting the encroaching darkness, he spotted between stanchions the last glare of the sun as it beamed against an upper floor window of an office block, bouncing towards him and cutting straight to the primordial. Rhythmically chewing on a samosa, oblivious to all the surrounding action, he could only feel without thinking as the beam moved through him. The usual habit of shaking your mind free from such an unfocused hook wouldn't form. Each attempt simply pulled him to another stream, as involved as the previous one. He reckoned at least ten minutes had elapsed when he finally, numbingly refocused his eyes on the train, relieved to see it unmoved on the platform. Right on cue, it bundled forward a few metres to induce a cavalry charge of passengers.

The reflection of the sun on the office window was still feeling its way through the base of Landell's skull when an adjacent passenger began rocking his head back and forth in an attempt to initiate a conversation. Until then, Landell had been blissfully adrift in the catchpool of the sunset's remnants, but the sallow visage of the man gradually gathered him back in. He'd been naively hoping that an evening departure would preclude the mandatory chatter of Indian train trips, but his initial disappointment would soon be challenged by an unusual entry point. "Do you want to know your future, sir?" asked a narrow-nosed man in the opposite seat.

"No thanks." Landell closed his eyes, guilt accompanying him as he settled his temple into a steel window frame and felt the rhythmic movement of the train reverberate through him.

"I am thinking you do, sir." The man looked downwards at Landell, part schoolmasterly part knowing hooker. "Are you familiar with *nadi*?"

"Ehhh?"

“Landell... I have your leaf here.” Landell straightened himself in trepidation, racing through his thoughts as to how this dark-skinned man of indeterminate age could have known his name. He looked towards his rucksack, jammed under his seat, to see if it had been disturbed. The man smiled knowingly. Irritated at being shook so easily, Landell pursed his lips and looked out the window as the train approached a station where no stop had been scheduled. It was now almost pitch black outside save one light at the far end of a platform. As the train zipped by the light, he noticed something fluttering from a railway pole. “Don’t be alarmed that I know your name. I saw it on the passenger list taped to the outside of the train as I boarded. That was just a simple trick I played on you. But the nadi is not a trick. It is even more precise than science itself.” The man kept his gaze on Landell until it was returned with some sort of acknowledgement. “And I have your nadi leaf with me right now. Of course, it is only yours as we have been brought together. But this I promise you...” The man leaned forward with rheumatic earnestness. “This is an original nadi leaf from the Great Temple.” Landell found himself nodding and believing, at least that this man was very different to every other self-appointed sage he’d encountered, including those back in the West. “Of course, we can stop right now if you wish, Landell. I don’t really do this for anybody anymore. There was just something about... well, about tonight.”

Landell peered out of the window into the sparse night, imagining the smell of charcoal displacing the dirty steel of the train fittings. “What about the *sidhi*?” he blurted.

“What do you know of that?” the man whispered.

“Not much. That’s why I’m asking you.”

“I think we should only consider the nadi. We need to be alone. Let’s go to the end of this carriage.” The man stood up and Landell saw stars against a deep navy sky, his thoughts rooting out a feel of ease as if in an incense-filled moment with music taking him back to the unfurnished thoughts of a past journey that hadn’t quite crystallized. Following pensively, he



felt a wider expanse of empty space than he could remember. Fleeting access to some childhood wonder made him believe more. A waft of incense filled his senses as all thoughts of people back home, social situations he hadn't sufficiently straddled and directions he'd once obsessed over no longer held any weight.

"Sit down Landell," the man said softly, throwing the slack of a light shawl over one shoulder. "You can see the leaf here. I will explain the patterns." Landell sat quietly, oblivious to the cold steel grating he was perched against, rapt in the explanation being put forward of how patterns on a leaf could determine his fate and how certain whorls were unique to his direction. Somehow, the fissures and spirals blended seamlessly with the receding tunnel of his thoughts, moving him towards a space that his informer filled with ease. "So, Landell. Did anything ring a bell? That is how you say, right?" The man grinned sideways as he gently placed the leaf between two pages and wrapped it in a length of safi.

"No, I mean yes." Landell stood up and straightened his now limber frame. "Yeah, ring a bell is okay. It was very interesting. How much do I owe you?"

"As you wish. We can wait until morning... that is if the train's on time."

Landell fumbled in his pockets before jostling his way back to his seat. The nadi reader wasn't following, but upon opening his eyes a few minutes later, Landell was facing him. He appeared to be in a deep sleep. Wondering whether he had himself fallen asleep while moving with the rhythm of the train, Landell went over the leaf in his head. It did look somehow unique; not just some baked or manipulated piece of foliage masquerading as a relic. He caught himself fading, with bottle green patterns filtering through his lobes, spinning away while newer dark silver shapes replaced them. At least thirty minutes of the silvery green drift continued before he registered the background hum of a burgeoning conversation among the four other men sitting in his compartment. Words were inaccessible

from behind the mesh of images Landell was letting circulate towards the deeper recesses of his matter. There seemed nothing more important at that time, nothing as crucial, even though no emotions were attached to any of the patterns. There could be no conscious jolt to tune into the conversation, the hum of which was gradually increasing. The first crystallized thought to interrupt him was a paranoid reflex asking why he hadn't yet been coerced into the conversation. That was the beginning of the end to the most neutrally bliss-ridden episode he'd had since being lost in wallpaper as a child. A stray gesticulation landed on his outer thigh.

"Don't talk to me about these blasted professors," railed a scholarly-looking man of anger.

"But we need professors to share their knowledge with the up and coming generations," replied a lungi-wearing woolly-jumpered civil servant.

"Huh, what knowledge?" responded the angry man.

Landell's green phase finally began to recede and the neighbouring faces came into focus. They looked standard bar their assured poses. The nadi-reader kept his eyes closed, motioning with his hand sporadically when emotions flared. Another man looked like a thoughtful athlete, nodding and lolling, waiting patiently for the time to strike. "They are always trying to carve out some pointless distinction to build a career around, always disagreeing with common sense for no good reason," he asserted.

"They do often disagree with others," admitted the government head.

"Until they find out you're on their side. Suddenly, you are right then," replied the lolling ripped face of the athlete.

"What does an indoor person know about plants?" continued the angry man.

Landell opened both eyes, trusting subtle demonstration would diffuse the racket. The nadi man opened one eye comedically and smirked at Landell, who retreated into the spirals of silver and green, partially phasing out the chatter and

allowing the clapping rail traction to take precedence in his imagination's perimeter. Images of home life interspersed with potential social victories before losing their power beneath the smell of steel and charcoal, wispy breezes permeating the disjointed carriage walls. By the time he came out of it, with a faint urge to piss and eat before bedtime, the voices had dimmed. Opening his eyes again, he noticed three of his neighbours had disembarked; only the nadi man and a wiry tribal remained. A calm energy was rising.

"The most powerful weed-killer known to man," announced a vendor's voice as he sidled up to Landell's booth. The wiry tribal man cocked his bronzed jaw, his shoulders remaining ramrod straight, while the nadi doctor held out a vertical palm in placation. Landell was now awake and locked into the scene. "Sir, this is the best one," asserted the seller, pushing his paunchy frame in between the seats of the booth. Landell assumed he was from a nearby factory, hawking some non-catalogued stock.

"*Argathni agni di sita*," hissed the wiry tribal without blinking. The nadi man seemed to be motioning the vendor to leave immediately. Unperturbed, the seller kicked on with his well-rehearsed spiel, splicing his sell with some powerful English words. "Get out," said the tribal between clenched teeth. "You know nothing about plants."

"I have more power than plants. I can destroy a plant in a flash."

"But can you create anything?" replied the tribal.

The nadi man addressed the vendor with a steely monotone that had him at first belligerently defensive but soon retreating like a mangy cur who'd had a beating put on it. Then he turned to the tribal man, bowed deeply and held out his hand in supplication. The tribal smiled slightly but its effect was enough to send a shallow wave beyond Landell's sentience. The writer sat frozen in his seat, eyes fixed on a bland stretch of Formica under the booth's upper berth.

As Landell scratched around underneath his berth for an errant bottle of water, he felt the dread of a foreign stomach pain percolate down his insides. It was unlike any bellyache he'd experienced before, its stretching hollowness threatening to curl him up at any moment. He gingerly convinced himself that it couldn't be serious. By the time he'd dragged his rucksack to the end of the carriage, it was on. As the multitudes teemed out and shovelled their way in at the same time, Landell made for the swinging door of the bathroom and dismissed any in-station etiquette. It was as debilitating as he could imagine. Thoughts of nineteenth-century illnesses ploughed through his system until he became stuck on the difference between yellow and scarlet fever.

As Landell shuffled, beaten, across a platform towards the main hall of Mysore station, he was spotted by a European, who bombarded him with questions of timetables. His mouth curling into his eyes, Landell nodded and exhaled, apologizing for his lack of knowledge while shuffling along, sweating inside and looking for any form of taxi. He was running out of fight. The European was not to be deterred. "Hey brother. Are you going to Kerala?" Landell focused to see a bug-eyed Scandinavian wearing fisherman's pants, rolling a cigarette while perched against a metal beam. Icy curls drooping over his eyes gave him the slant of something futuristic. Landell held two crooked fingers up in acknowledgement. "Hey man, wait up. You don't wanna talk?" Denmark met California in a needy drawl.

"Sorry... in a bit of a hurry."

"This is India, man. No point in being in a hurry."

"Yeh. I suppose you're right."

"You know it, brother. Anyway, be careful in Kerala. I was there back in the day, when it was cool. You know, in the early stages, closer to the beginning. But now it's getting commercialized. It's lost its edge."

"Okay," replied Landell, confused as to where to jump off.

“Yeah. Kovalam is gone. A few years ago, there were just one or two wooden beach shacks. It was paradise.”

“A fucking bamboo café is paradise?” muttered Landell as the pain dropped him a level.

“Hey man. Be cool. Anyway, you can check out Varkala. It’s shanti.”

“Yeah.”

“See you around maybe.”

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After navigating the back streets behind the station to locate a cheap guesthouse and dump his rucksack there, Landell headed back out to score drugs from the local pharmacist. “Total shut down,” my friend. “I can guarantee it,” the chemist promised.

“What’s it called?”

“Leep-o-mide.” The pharmacist nodded knowingly. “Does sir want some Valium? Cheap and best.” Landell balked at accepting the housewife’s choice but merrily trusted another shot-down agent of petroleum.

The sandalwood city wasn’t yielding the olfactory delights Landell was expecting as he aimlessly drifted into an open-air market. Fruit stalls streamlined his view of the street up ahead. Rows of oranges sat proudly on one side, while an assortment of pineapples, coconuts and tomatoes leaked into his eyes from the other. The fruit vendors smiled hopefully, declaring the superiority of their fruits over other regions’. Smiling in return, Landell considered their joking entreaties as a symbol of equality. He turned a corner, still smirking, and ran into the handicrafts section of the market, oblivious to the fact that this place was a potential minefield. Indignant sellers touted their bric-a-brac with a borderline psychotic sense of entitlement. “What about a gift for your momma?” rang out between reminders that his wife deserved a sandalwood jewellery box, with a secret compartment of course.

“Psst, over here brother?” hissed a voice from an alley in between rows of stalls. Landell turned to see a red-eyed man put two fingers up to his lips in the universal sign for smoking. Landell shook his head, again smiling, romantically saving it for the beach where he imagined there would be better gear at cheaper prices. He was now at the easternmost extremity of the market, and it was thinning out to a few stalls selling motor parts and wallpaper. Turning around to mentally trace his route, he could still see some vendors rearranging their handicrafts. Landell decided he would make his way back to his guesthouse around the perimeter of the market, having had enough observation for one night.

As he shuffled towards a broken footpath, he saw an unlikely standoff at two open-air shops between a pair of placid shopkeepers and three moustached mechanics tilting hard, voices breaking in exasperation as an elderly light-skinned man mediated. The two shopkeepers stared straight out of their shops, oblivious to the spectators who were forming a few yards away. After a couple of minutes of valiantly trying to cut through the culturally riddled behaviour, Landell caught the eye of a smiling young man at the edge of the group of spectators. He motioned to him with his head. “What’s the problem?”

“Which is your country?” the young man replied.

“Err... England. What’s all the fuss about?”

“Oh it is about religion.”

“Really.”

“Yes. The mechanics wouldn’t refrain from making ungodly noise during morning meditation. And one of the Buddhist shopkeepers made fun of the mechanics’ afternoon puja. Now there is a religious war.” Landell held his mouth with a half-cocked smile, almost formulating the thought that the mantras of both of these faith systems were brothers in learning by rota. After another minute of watching, he grew disinterested, turned away and began walking along the road towards his guesthouse when he felt a shooting in the base of

his skull as he noticed the moon's reflection hitting the upper window of a three-storey non-descript building.

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## **CHAPTER FIFTEEN**



The first time you hit a sharp incline carrying a rucksack on your back with no inkling as to where your journey is going to end, a brick-like feeling occupies your core. And as I scaled a trifling hill only to see the full extent of my next few days' walking open up before me, I felt a wave of trepidation that was going to be beautiful to swallow. Even in the dank aftermath of a downpour, with thoughts of being stashless within hours unless I somehow scored, I still felt a thrill moving away from any connection with familiar holds. The thought of a proper detox before caning hard was timelessly appealing.

As densely dark as Mannikaran was, it was still a stop on the tourist trail... maybe only for the sickest or most adventurous of tourists, but on that flattened trail that masquerades as being off the beaten track. And the foothills outside the Parvati Valley were populated with signs of such themes, from the speechless Dutch-French couple trekking back to town after an aborted attempt to go off limits to shake their brown habit lasted only one rain-sodden night to the locals angrily hurling apples at foreigners who wouldn't buy a bag of fruit they couldn't possibly finish. But it only took a couple of hours to see the first hints of the shimmering nature that once inspired that mad traveller Roerich. Just like in the Naggar valley where he'd set up home, ethereal hues and glints came into focus. Now, there were no locals tainted by tourism, scrabbling for pennies, but bemused hill folk usually happy to see someone coming from halfway across the world to put himself through the same physical strain that they had no choice but to endure. And just as the quality dissipates over time from those places frequented by tourists, so too does it remain in the places where they don't set foot. As I ascended those first hills like a trail of pollutant, I did so lightly, fantasizing that my mark would be subsumed by everything around, leaving no more than a transient wisp.

By late afternoon, my heart was filled with oxygen and each breathless moment left a residue of elation in my chest. I was way out from the crowd, with not even any errant villagers checking on their more remote fields of crops to keep me company. The Sun



had lost its strength and was now a burnt orange colour, with its fade energizing the hills around me. Up ahead, I could see the higher peaks of Dhar Ratang. I chided myself for thinking about how I was totally fucked if it rained, with my flimsy tent and lack of waterproofs. The scene didn't deserve such heresy. Turquoise and peach began to gather around the setting Sun, inducing me to fire up, forcing as beautiful an interface between hashish and aesthetics as anyone could hope for.

By the time I had pitched my tent in the shadow of a sprawling tree, I was reeling from the afternoon. Darkness had fallen quickly, and I momentarily registered the stupidity of where I'd set up shop before dismissing the danger. With admission from nowhere, its presence was all over me again.

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Upon waking, I felt as alert as ever. Cool sunbeams were illuminating my feet, which were pressed against the dewy canvas. Unzipping the tent door, I popped my head outside and looked from side to side cartoonishly. The dreaded spectre of rain was nowhere in sight. But I shouldn't have been goofing around: "Deep and down, there's nothing like that golden brown." High peaks of the western Himalaya glared over me, and foothills below served as a reminder that the more peaks I scaled, the more I was going to discover—for as far I'd be able to go. I had no idea why vague memories of doing brown on that Kashmiri houseboat were pervading my morning thoughts, but I dismissed them and finished off the fruit I'd brought along. It was already past eight, and I didn't want to be pulling a trail of flies over the next hill. I emptied some raw oatmeal into a cup and topped it with what was left of the yoghurt I'd carried with me. The sky was almost cloudless, and I decided I didn't want to be walking when the Sun was at its highest. Quickly, I packed up my tent, prayed that the last food stop before the Pin Valley National Park would be open as promised and steadfastly refused to engage with the reminders from the previous night's last waking hours when I'd felt its presence for the first time in over a week.

I felt obliged to head north-easterly to Spiti, not to traipse around the Buddhist temple at Kungri but to experience the last

stream of uninterrupted living Bon as practiced by some of the broad-faced smiling villagers. And on my way to Pin Parvati, I would luck out in the shape of the best type of philosopher: a total random. He approached me in a swarthy light, for one moment inducing me to believe that it was in others I felt the weight. I'd just pulled myself onto a ridge running right along the side of a mountain I'd been praying for the previous hour I wouldn't have to climb. He held his hand up as I approached, a luminous orange sleeve partially covering a cotton one-piece that resembled a nightgown. I was expecting a signal of surprised acknowledgement from a local wanderer—he didn't have the bent of a monk—not a stream of fluent Indian English. "Hello sir. You are speaking English... yes, no." I nodded once and smiled, dipping my head from the sunrays coming from over his shoulder. "It's very unusual to see a tourist up here."

"Well, I like to go walkabouts."

"Yes. It's a good place to get some thinking in. Much better than Kullu. Were you there, friend?" I studied his aging face, its ridges and taut gullies yielding no information. His lucid eyes and languid frame seemed to be casually hiding a life full of experience, but he was advertising nothing. I felt somewhat insolent trying to glean information from a man who had most likely seen a fuckload more than I ever would. "Yes. Don't see many types up here. Anyway, there are still some nice paths to be walked. You are very welcome, not that it is up to me to welcome you."

"Well, it's nice to be here," I replied.

"Yes. I suppose you've come here to get some good thinking done, so I won't detain you anymore."

"Not at all. It's a pleasure meeting you." His way was dragging me up.

"Thank you, but I must make haste. I want to be reaching Mannikaran before darkness. Anyway, my friend, don't forget." He began to walk away, and I smiled thinking he was precisely the type of person I wouldn't forget. "Any new philosophy you arrive at will always be resisted by the powers that be if it has any value."

"Okay," I replied.

He turned and with an absence of affectation coolly stated. "And if it's accepted by some named commentators, it's ultimately

of little worth, just closer to the latest marginally relevant developments.”

“So, to be truly of worth it must be opposed by all who comment?” I asked, beaming. He laughed and bowed to me, and once more I felt the serene sadness of knowing I wouldn’t again meet a person I should want to meet many times. But I bounced on, thoughts of lapsing back into addled inertia departing as soon as they arrived. Just about any thought seemed to leave as soon as it arrived. The intention to get through a lot of mental sifting was there, but the attention was faltering and the retention was nowhere to be found. I turned one last time to bid him a visual farewell and caught a sunbeam colliding off a rocky outcrop, imagining his orange jacket being lit up. “The truth be glistening in those hidden valleys and passes,” I hammed defensively.

And on and on I went, twisting and turning along the trails walked into the hillsides over the thousands of years these mountains had supported people. It must have been five or six hours until I saw any sign of life, pausing only to check my bearings against the higher peaks. I was busy flitting between capturing angles of brilliant shrubbery and wondering what bad brew of characters I’d meet if I ever lurched back into the named places of India when I caught sight of it squashed between two luminous clouds. It looked old as coin, perched on an escarpment, with white *stupas* and *goompas* dotting a rough path wending its way up to it. As I pulled back my head to take in the full breadth of the temple’s environs, marvelling at how it probably had barely changed in over a thousand years, I spotted a jet black four-wheel drive easing to a halt at the roadhead by the bottom of the escarpment. Two elderly orange-robed monks hopped out while a leather-jacketed driver milled around the bonnet, lighting up a cigarette and holding his hand up defensively as the holy men shouted some instructions to him from halfway up the hill. There had to be a settlement of customers nearby, I decided, as I scoped the view for signs of homesteads.

I could feel them, somewhere around a bluff or bend in the desert road I couldn’t quite bring into focus. But what I was seeing was something that had been gone for centuries. Perhaps some stone walls or old ruins would allow me to construct what had almost entirely vanished. I kept looking, almost feeling them, but

just as soon as my hopes rose, they'd fade with the acceptance that what I was looking for had been gone for ages. But then not quite, as a white-washed stone building came into view with a narrow-faced pudgy nose somehow rising to meet my smiling frown as I realised I'd inadvertently rambled onto her land. I'd got myself caught in a maze of vegetable furrows, with the only choice being straight ahead to her back door. She motioned her hands downwards as I approached, signalling me to stop. I returned the instruction with a broad grin and perched my ass on the edge of a crumbling wall running along the nearside of her vegetable patch. Within moments she was in and out of the doorway to her abode, returning with lemon water and rock hard bread. She plopped them in front of me and began to wrestle with a small jar. Each time she failed to open it, she'd turn to me and grin like a conspiring child. After a few more attempts, I held my hand out to her. The thought of me opening the jar seemed to fill her with delight, so much so that she called to a neighbour who was toiling in a nearby field. It wasn't a pushover, but with a bit of turbo I got it open. The two ladies, probably in their forties but with skins baked by the high mountain Sun appearing much older, laughed wildly before tapping my forearms. All three of us dipped bread into the jam jar and feasted on the local apricot delicacy.

"Merrica, Merrica," blurted the neighbour as I drained a glass of lemon water. I shook my head dramatically.

"Francey, Francey," she wailed. Again I shook my head. The two women looked at each other quizzically and then back to me.

"England, queen?" I nodded and smiled. "Queen, queen," they repeated. I shook my head with mock disdain, and they belly-laughed uncontrollably. By the time I'd drunk the remainder of the water, they'd begun to chat furtively. Suddenly, my host's neighbour held her folded hands to her head in the universal sign language for sleep.

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The next morning I sat on a bare concrete floor gambling with my teeth by gnawing on the previous day's bread, occasionally glancing up at the woman who had taken me in. She might have only been in her early thirties, I surmised, each time she let her

hospitable stares overflow into gaminess. I barely felt ashamed that I was down with post-colonially overstepping her human warmth and ploughing into her right there on the cold ground. The more I smiled, the more she smiled. I put it down to not having spoken to anyone in a few days. "Brother," she blurted as I poured myself a second glass of mint tea. I was wondering whether she was establishing the boundaries of our relationship when a wiry man in his late twenties entered the room, kicked off his shoes and barked some orders at my host. He had a face that could have been great: it was chiselled oak, with brilliantly high cheekbones and furious eyebrows. But his eyes contained the spoiled entitlement of an only son. He was determined to establish an order.

"English I know. Why come here?"

"Your English is very good," I replied. "I don't know why I came here." I wanted to see if he was as good going backwards as he was coming forwards. Few people are.

"Must be reason." He couldn't hide his pupils.

"Walking from Kullu to Nepal... quickest route." I winked.

He nodded his head slowly before suddenly stopping and staring at me earnestly. "You know our religion?" His sister dropped some fresh bread onto the plate between us and refilled a hot water flask.

"Bon, Shivaite, Buddhist, all of the above," I replied.

"Ah, you know well. We are Bon, but yes we have some Buddhist parts, but Shivaite no."

"I heard there were some Shivaite around these parts."

"There are some in next village, on other mountainside." He waved his hand behind his head. He could have been referring to any of a multitude of mountains.

"Still all living close to each other?" I enquired.

"Yes, why not. It's been this way for thousands of years."

"Makes sense. How is your English so good?" I boldly snaked my arm towards the fresh bread for his sister's entertainment.

"I trained to be tour guide. My sister was to be local teacher, but other woman got job. Corruption is everywhere you know." I eyed him flicking at his fresh bread with an appearance of surly vengeance. Suddenly, he looked at me hopefully. "You will stay here for a while. My sister is liking you."

I panicked under my poker face. “No, I have to be leaving soon. I have a long way to go and not much time.”

“No, you will stay at least tonight. I will take you to the temple. You can see the real Bon monks.”

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I sat cross-legged, smiling disinterestedly at a group of young monks asking me about English football results as they wheeled in the main man. He glanced around the setting as he was ushered to two particularly comfortable looking cushions on the floor. After having signalled some indecipherable gestures to his attendants, he nodded benignly at me, instantly hitting the correct ego button. I was barely aware, busy trying to strike the correct balance between the deference everyone else seemed to be feeling and an analysis of a superb *thanka* hanging on the wall behind the seated Bon priest. Within an olive and orange silk brocade was a series of images, strangely familiar though I couldn't have seen them before: multi-limbed gods in congress surrounded a marauding demon, apparently in thrall. But I was being pestered with sign language by my host's brother's best friend, who was our man on the inside. His brother, it turned out, was one of the novices ushering the head priest into position. For this role, his family were incalculably proud. And his big brother wanted anybody within passing distance to validate it.

I hardly registered three words from the address. In some way, I was disappointed with myself. I'd always been drawn to the Bon faith, whether by some random misguided sense of romanticism or a more probable drop-off point on my search for the source of these streams emanating from the Great Mountains. Either way, the ceremony was mercilessly drawn out. I was walking like an unstuck crab down the temple steps when my enabler sidled up to me and spoke a weird fusion of words. “Yes. That be how we do it in this area.”

“Yeah, thanks,” I replied, thinking only of lush Himalayan forest.

“Our flow has been like that since back in the old days,” he continued. At the bottom of the steps, I made my excuses—I would have to set off on my journey to reach a camping spot before

nightfall. Whether my urgency to depart or failure to deposit a cash amount in the richest house in town had offended the surly men, I couldn't work out, but my host was delighted with the paltry amount I left for her. The weight of a rucksack felt surprisingly comforting as I kicked my way southwards down a muddy path.

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I knew the next few days were going to be hardcore, pulling myself over mountains I had no business being around. So, I decided to take the tourist pass and spend the first night by the mellow shores of Lake Kaley. It was mostly barren ground, but one patch of scrub lay with a perfectly diagonal view to Manirang, which soared over the hinterland with silvery green promise, tipping me over the levels that would be required for the next day's mammoth trek. I pitched up without incident, conscious of the bounce that might follow.

After fishing the credit card holder from the recesses of my rucksack, I smoke sealed the interior of the tent, unsure if the chill of the night would deter mosquitoes from hunting. Lying still for a few moments, barely buzzed, I awoke guessing it must have been approaching ten. I reckoned one more smoke would put me into a drift, with brief moments of alighting on future memories or ideal scenarios of a life back home that was always around the corner. But that flow was being blocked, or perhaps was fading, releasing from its tethers.

Shuffling my body to the tent door, I unzipped the night sky. A speckled sheet of fleshed-out stars smothered my senses. It was fucking ridiculous. Any idiot could make out the constellations as they delineated themselves from their neighbours. The Plough, the Great and Little Bears were all apparent to the dipshit checking on them. Even those more obscure patterns—Cassiopeia, Sagitta and Corvus—could be made out with ease. It was still, silent and astonishing. I stood there for at least an hour, occasionally taking a pull on a long-extinguished nugget of Malana Cream. That was the quickest yet most timeless hour of my life. A belt of fresh air straight off the lake brought me to, and I stuck some music in my ears: a random mix of styles—somehow fitting—and I caned hard, blasting the sides of the Rigpa that had been carrying me around

those mountains. It was a pure stream from head to toe, ear to ear, and soul to whole. For the first time in weeks, he was gone. But as soon as I registered that, I grimaced at the thought of him finding a new background layer to loiter in, waiting for the right time to re-emerge.

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The next morning was foreboding. Clouds began to circle around the lake as I packed up. The only information I had was to head south-east towards Manirang and that just west of the mountain I would hit a river, which I was to follow through a small pass and keep on tracking until I hit a highway, or country road. It seemed simple; people had been zigzagging between these minor passes for thousands of years. But they weren't Western chancers trying to live out some displaced fantasy acquired from catching the final twenty minutes of a Sunday afternoon matinee. These were the hard yards: three days of trekking through unpopulated passes, down ravines and along barely navigable rivers. And they were the most rewarding. The acceptance of whatever would fall my way soon receded into an oblique view of happiness at the small discoveries: a swathe of green in impossible juncture with jutting rocky outcrops, a grey feline movement in the distance that I could readily attribute to a snow leopard, a misleading mountainside in parallax with distant objects I fabulated into a village around the next spur where everything was as it should be. I ripped through ten hours trekking on that first day, punctuated by a one-hour break where I spent too much time trying to figure out whether I should ration my power until I reached Puh, a small border town whose bazaar was bound to contain Chinese batteries ripe for leaking.

In some strange self-motivational manner, the afternoons seemed like a reward for the work of morning walks. And there always seemed to be an unexpected bonus. I managed to walk along the lower escarpments of Manirang, cheating my way along a route to the southern side of that beautiful mountain. It deserved to be climbed and respected, but even here time had a measure of control. Or at least the unreal time I and millions of others had decided to pin our hopes to. Once forgotten, time was a truly great friend, elevating the regular to the serene. And not much more than



a mile south-west of the foot of the silver green mountain I sheepishly paid my respects to with a Shivaite bow as I skirted by, there was the source of a river that was probably nameless, at least to the hack geographers who pissed away good money in a dialectical spew. Now it was just a matter of following the river as it zigged and zagged towards southern Himachal. And I spoke to her for most of the afternoon.

“You thought I was going to escape from you, did you?” She barely rustled.

“Don’t be coming at me with all that ‘I’m purer than you’ bullshit.” She just flowed, smoothly clear, rivulets flexing gently from time to time.

“Okay then; be like that.” I knew when I was beaten.

As she gathered width, her beauty filled. When I thought she wasn’t looking, I would turn away from the bank, especially when brambles or small trees came into view. I was in search of an apricot-coloured berry, whose even sweet taste broke up the sheer blankness of the food I’d brought for sustenance. There were never any after-effects; you could get messy with them, especially if mixed with oatmeal, and kick on without fear of dreaded stomach cramps feeding visions of unaffordable rescue helicopters being your only out. There were other berries on show, but I wasn’t in a gambling mood. Besides, I was more focused on the small river plains that might yield those varieties of mushroom known to sharpen your mind to as receptive a state as humanly possible. These weren’t the psilocybin hatch openers, but more of a cleaner of the dusty rooms that weren’t quite attached.

Just as the Sun was setting, its peach glow nestling over the Karakorum, I came to a confluence in the river. The sunbeams made it an easy choice as I followed the waters in a south-westerly direction, bounding along and wondering when I would have to stick to a feasible camping spot for the night. Mountains ran alongside the northern bank, but to the south the land opened: a green plain beckoned. I could become hopelessly marooned if rains came, but there was little chance of that. Besides, the mushrooms were calling hard. I looked down the river, again imagining an extinct local culture only remembered by a river crossing. It wasn’t going to be that easy.

“This is fucking insane,” I muttered as I crouched by the bank and tried to gauge the water’s depth as sunlight glittered off the surface. The river was moving slowly, but then I recalled something about how to the eye, a current appeared nowhere near as powerful. I kept angling for a clean look of the riverbed but had already made my mind up I was getting wet if I could carry my rucksack without getting it wet. As the Sun’s rays weakened, I caught perfect sight of the rounded stones covering the riverbed. “Fuck it.” I lowered myself in and felt the icy flow up to my thighs. Holding my rucksack high above my head for balance, I carefully measured the twenty or so metres to the opposite bank. There were a couple of stumbles, and when I got within six feet of the other side, I launched my bag onto the grassy verge—I wasn’t mentally prepared to fall at the last. I pulled myself up onto level ground. My waterproof pants had failed, and my boxer shorts had been splashed icy cold, but I had gotten lucky. Before me was as level a piece of ground as I’d seen since landing in Delhi. And a Himalayan meadow stretched out for a few hundred yards in perfect bottle green. I prayed the first frost hadn’t yet hit as I imagined taut mushrooms waiting for me.

Scavenging as the Sun disappeared, mauve and lemon skies barely lighting the field, I turned to see I’d already strayed about a kilometre from the tent. I was bordering on frantic as I swept my eyes over the ground, amateurishly trying to gauge the reach of the river. It was then I realised I could only identify four or five types of poisonous mushroom and maybe two types of cordyceps. And even so, I would be taking the worst of it by getting it into me without any preparation. And then it appeared: a long bifurcated wretch, with a deep purple black cylindrical head. And its family members were close by. I plucked about six of them, brought them back to the tent and decided that washing and boiling was in order. They were big mothers and hard to clean, with their grisly skin resisting domination. I had no idea how to get a grip on the required grammage. It was funny: I could calculate the weight of hash by holding blocks of solid in my palm, but mushrooms always felt strangely hollow. Usually, with big ones, you are told one is enough. So, naturally, I got two of them into me, and held tight to avoid the seemingly mandatory retching.

Thirty minutes later, I was as sharp as a laser beam. And I was duty bound to ride it out unadulterated. It had been eight or nine hours since I'd taken a hit of hash, and it was as out of my system as possible. Of course, I'd have to blend them for purely empirical purposes at some stage. Hunkered down, I locked onto the first stars on show as the Sun's dying embers filtered away. I hope it was the next day, or later, when I realised how stupid lucky I was to be there, totally scene-less in a zone desperately aspired to. In real time, I wasn't thinking for even a moment.

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The next morning I tried to piece a timeline together for the night before as I gathered up all my possessions before loping down river. The only thing I was certain of was that I woke up in the tent, though the zipper was flapping in the morning breeze when I opened my eyes. I felt confident that the serene vision I had of pissing in the early-hours starlight was genuine, but the remainder of the night was the opposite of a blur. Part of me argued that I'd spent seven hours watching and mapping the emerging stars until I'd reached a union. Another part of me scoffed at such concurrent commitment and flakiness. Whatever was true, I was incredibly alert and not the slightest bit leggy as I strode on, beyond engaging in the effort of achieving what I imagined befell others. This was an easier trek, straight down river towards one of the more remote highways of India, one which led to the border with China, a place where two great nations met in distrust as they eyed each other over a mish-mash of ancient peoples who giggled at the thought of belonging to either country but readily accepted sovereignty when it came to obediently producing their ID cards to go on official trading journeys they'd been unofficially taking for millennia.

I had that feeling of being in the home stretch, which was fine until I began overlooking everything that was still around me. The sensation only subsided when I arrived at a small unmanned checkpoint. Peering inside, I spotted an empty cigarette packet lying beside an exhausted bottle of Indian whiskey. I smelled the brutality just to see where my receptors were at. It was rank, and as I spun around I saw the peaks of dhars I could not name glisten in the morning sky. I quickly retreated and picked up the pace, determined

to get to the road before the midday Sun taxed me. Within twenty minutes I could hear lonely trucks trundling towards the border, but the road was still not in view. As the sight of a grisly man pissing into the river formed before my eyes, I spotted tarmac above him. A yellow sign with the number twenty-two daubed on it looked slightly tragic in the face of the peaks all around. This road had been ingeniously carved into the pass but was ready to be buried at any moment. I felt weirdly sad at moving away from an uninhabited zone.

Walking into Puh seemed like a bad idea: I'd draw too much unnecessary attention even if I tried to bury myself in a crowd of day traders. But half an hour later as I leapt off the back of a pick-up truck masquerading as a taxi, I wasn't noticed among the throng of people milling about the makeshift stalls of Chinese products: torches, cassette players and knives were garnering the most interest. I took a cursory look at couple of items, shook my head knowingly as I pretended to be able to read the Chinese print on various boxes and smiled disappointedly as a vendor barked random rupee amounts at me. I shook my head one more time, casting my eyes over his stock. Defeated, I picked up one of the stronger looking knives; a kind of non-hunters hunting knife... just what I needed. "How much is this?"

"Only four hundred rupees," he replied with a touch of concern.

"Get the fuck out of here. The Chinese sell them for two hundred."

"No sir, it's not possible."

"It's possible."

"No."

"Are you calling me a liar?"

"No brother." There was a look of terror in his eyes. I'd forgotten that after days of marching, I probably looked half hyped-up soldier, half illuminated mountain man.

"I'm a busy man," I declared theatrically.

"Of course, sir."

"I know the real price is two hundred maximum. I'll give you two fifty. That's twenty-five percent white tax."

"Sir, three hundred is best price. Really sir." Up until that point I genuinely liked this man. He didn't have any of those carny

tendencies market sellers usually have. But as he pleaded, he held his head to one side with intense sadness in his eyes. It was a challenge to my soul. I dropped two hundred and fifty-five rupees on the table in raggedy notes.

“Give me my knife,” I demanded.

He exhaled genuinely and passed me the knife and uttered brilliance: “Just ten rupees more, sir.” I feigned fury. “Okay okay,” he conceded.

It was five miles or so from the actual border, but Puh fit the description of a dusty shithole, with the obligatory gusts of wind blowing with ill intent. The food stalls and dhaba looked dodgy as fuck, but I needed to get a thali into me if I was to continue into the mountains on the other side of the highway, and I was dead set on spending the minimum amount of time in this open wound. As I lorried the last drips of lentil soup into my needy gullet, eyes blazing, a man with a slightly cleaner get-up than the others in view addressed me. “And what is your business here, sir?”

Oh fuck off, I thought. “I’m a food critic.”

“Really sir?” He straightened his back.

“Yeah, really. I’ve heard good things about the thali here.”

“And did it meet with your satisfaction?”

I wafted the mosquitoes away from my face and looked out onto the roadside, where two Chinese traders were arguing with a shabby looking policeman. “Baksheesh,” I bellowed.

My interrogator frowned before continuing. “Is sir going to China?” He fingered his moustache slyly as he asked.

“No visa.” Giving away information for free was a basic error by me.

“Would sir like to take a day trip to China?”

“No.” I was beginning to like plastic chairs.

“But it is so close,” he protested.

“I know.”

“It seems a tragedy to be so close. I can make arrangements for a quick border excursion.”

I wasn’t sure if his entire slant was aiming up or down.

“Sounds like a lot of baksheesh.”

“No sir, only small baksheesh necessary.”

“No thanks.”

“But you can tell your friends that you crossed into China from India. Think of their delight at your tales of adventure.” He was now standing up for no apparent reason.

“I can tell them that anyway.”

“But the people are different on that side. You should see them.”

“I can see them outside here. I've got a good imagination. Anyway, I need to be on my way.”

“Where are you going sir?”

“To Nepal.”

“How?”

“Walking.”

“Those mountains are too dangerous. “

“Good.” I stood up and handed two ten-rupee notes to the cashier, keeping hold of my last lucky red twenty-rupee note.

“I insist you cannot go. You must come with me.” He stuck his chest out dramatically and brought his eyes up to my chin.

“Listen man. This is all just commentary. I'm going to walk through those mountains.”

“But there are snow leopards up there.”

“Excellent; they're beautiful.”

“But they could eat you.”

“I don't taste good.”

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I walked on and as all signs of Puh vanished, I felt at ease to be back in the mountains, imagining how no self-respecting snow leopard would eat a white man when there were glorious ibex on offer. Suddenly, the image of a coolly threatening big cat came to me, winking at me while drinking a bottle of Coke, as I thought of the sorry provisions I had picked up in Puh. For some reason I'd left myself woefully short of supplies: a couple of bags of now cold boiled rice, a few crusty samosas, a bunch of Chinese bananas and four packets of grim biscuits; and this was to get me through to Purali, almost fifty miles away. Not to mention the fact that I was trying to stay ahead of the creeping winter, although in my hubris I'd been humble enough to give myself a ten-day start on the cold. So far, I'd had an idea of where I was heading due to a combination

of prior knowledge, information gleaned from pushy guides and a feel for the ebbs and flows of northern Himachal. But now I was into a different zone, and I was pushing Nature to break me for God knows what reason. I hoped it was just the final stage of detox, but I could well have been on a mission of mercy. I only had one trick left up my sleeve, and as I skirted close to the Chinese border and the peril of random posts manned by trigger-happy drunks wearing obsolete uniforms, I saw Gang Chua up ahead. I knew passing to the east would lead me into realms of a wild I could only pray to navigate. To the west was also troublesome as it appeared unnavigable, although the promise of a dry riverbed was somehow beckoning me. I needed to gamble and decided on east, only placating myself with the promise of looping around to the west as soon as I'd passed the mountain.

The river I'd crossed a few miles after Puh came into view again further eastward, providing deluded satisfaction. In the crystallized delirium I later attributed to getting greedy with mushrooms, I decided that the river would guide me to safety instead of to its source higher up the slopes. I was hemmed in by dhars. Even if I'd had the supplies and willpower to keep on going, it was a huge ask for a griffin. And that was when I unknowingly played my final card: I did that thing that people in my situation usually failed to do. The mountain would answer any question you might have, and its answers were crystal clear. The people to whom this wasn't apparent hadn't offered themselves, so I did. And as soon as I tapped out, I tapped in. It was right there in front of me, and it was everywhere. And it came with so many bonuses. Every slope, whether glaciated, barren or dotted with green, was beautiful... the starkness just as much as the bounty.

I never did see a snow leopard while traipsing around their patch, but they saw me. Some looked on in confusion, others with a feint sense of awe; and my favourite ones just laughed loosely at a ridiculous sight. And as I found an out on the south-eastern slopes of Gang Chua, it seemed natural to see a chute opening up to something like a plateau before rising again to a pass that wasn't going to stop me. I bounded on, surrounded by glassy peaks as I descended into the hollow. I'd never felt less lonely in my life: I was completely attached.

It was surprising in a way that a panorama so vast could seem so compact. All of its elements pieced together in one snapshot. And down that chute I slid, tracking it until it swept east again, and I kept on following, oblivious to the direction, instead pursuing the low-lying gullies, happy to stroll casually to my doom or be shot out the other end before stepping on air in any direction I chose. It might seem shameful to some that during that twenty-mile zigzag I registered the cool beauty of the landscape on just a couple of occasions, and only then due to some movement of rocks on one of the nameless beauties or, fancifully, snow leopards in the distance. And as I finally zagged back in a south-westerly direction, I found myself in a breathless corridor. I was dropping in altitude, but the air was somehow thinner, probably some trick of the land, contours upon contours. And then it came to me that what was different in the air was the lack of traces of habitation. It seemed like this was a spot where no one had lived and only a few loose ones had trampled on, the loneliest of loners separating themselves from communities as isolated as could be. And for the first and last time, I wrote while icily sober, reams crystallizing as I walked. No deep brown was necessary to get me flowing, and I wasn't holding a pen, still believing that taking notes of real life experiences was literary heresy. Instead, I just spoke it without deluding myself into placing any markers on the moments for future reference. Whether it was scathing or soothing in tone was irrelevant. It was as even and pure a flow as I'd emitted, protected in this arid pass from ever rusting. And I was blissful in the knowledge that it wouldn't dare come to me after a day like that, even if I was wide open.

As darkness fell, it dawned on me that I had no concept of the potential dangers of pitching a tent in the shade of another Himalayan peak. Looking up, I saw the slate sheen of its rock face. I couldn't see any signs of an impending rockslide, but I still began to unconsciously edge towards what I felt was a safe distance. And like the disgusting horseshoe that I am, instead of dying from dehydration or exposure, I felt my feet buckle under uneven ground. I looked down to see wet pebbles, and I turned to see the bubbling source of a river. In my scything delirium, I'd forgotten I hadn't taken in any water that day, never mind feeding my skin. I walked on a few hundred yards until I saw a river becoming defined and, before it gained too much power, set up by its side. I just lay in



my tent, dimly aware that somewhere tourists were seething at other tourists encroaching on what they fantasized was their virgin beach while just a river away, I would reach the end of my personal Himalaya.

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On just a packet of mealy biscuits, I made it down the ten miles or so to where my guiding river intersected with another Indian highway. A supreme space opened up in front of me, between two grassy ranges. As I pulled myself up by a barrier on the side of the road, I looked back at the lay of the land. And through small straggling trees by the far side of the river, way before the land began to rise to the Sankari range, I stared through an aerial tube that ended with me glimpsing the eyes I'd seen in the roadside forest on the way to Chamba. Before their effect had dissipated, I was hauling myself down from the lift I'd hitched into the village of Gangotri.

It was a classic pit-stop, its bustling tattiness somewhat alleviated by the mountain air. Yet Gangotri was still host to lowland chancers hawking displaced handicrafts and adjacent villagers spewing charcoal in the name of industry. It was going to be the last chance I'd have to get a square meal inside me before I reached Badrinath, fifty miles or so away, past the Valley of Flowers. And then, out of nowhere, I was on automatic pilot, barely aware of the swathes of green around me. I tried to keep an eye out for the lauded flowers but couldn't see any. Of all the areas I'd walked through so far, this was the least affecting, even though it was the most visited. It was hard to explain: maybe some shift into expectation at the changing streams auguring the onset of happy snappers and errant pilgrims. And as I skirted the upper edge of the mountainsides overlooking the valley, I saw moving dots that could only be people. They moved in file, they spread out nervously before returning to form and they stalled momentarily in preparation before logging their movements. I unfairly assigned an absence of joy or wonder to their ruminations. But still no flowers from where I was standing, though I did become absorbed in some mauve plant creeping out of a stony crevasse while those below couldn't get out of the way of their cameras. And from there, I

traced my eyes to some loose pebbles at the base of a boulder. And then I was gone, flitting between angles, oblivious to the snappers below, occasionally counting steps to an indiscernible landmark but usually slipping between thoughts while allowing some markers to escape the Rigpa. And that's how I went, only coming up to ply myself with water. By the time I stopped to rest, my belly doubled over a rock, I was thinking only of penning impenetrable wank in a dizzy scrawl, disallowing any thoughts to fully form in my head. I saw myself retrieving my pad and my pen, but after that I went blank, only coming to when realizing it was Badrinath I was high above. From here it would be more or less a roll, mostly dropping in altitude to the remote north-eastern, largely unattended border with Nepal.

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## ***CHAPTER SIXTEEN***



Landell took a swig of water while it was still cool and nodded towards his worried guide, who in turn slowed his pace for his huffing customer. Less than five minutes off a dirt road leading into the jungle, Landell realized he was bushed, unable to navigate his way through the grasping trees without the wiry guide who'd made him outside Mysore Station while he struggled with the plastic wrapping of a water bottle. Without the comfort of a river to walk beside, Landell felt his jaw pulsing as his breathing quickened. Each time he summoned up the energy to look up, his Tamil guide would nod smilingly, giving the thumbs up sign to encourage his passenger. "Is there a river nearby?" bleated Landell as he felt the power of the sun begin to crank the pit of his skull.

"Kurnagala is coming. We can walk down river, but our journey will be longer that way," responded the guide, slyly eying his customer's growing desperation. "No problem, though; as you like." The guide turned around and led the way back to where they'd left the dirt road before making for the east. Striving to placate his increasingly irate customer, he promised that he was taking the quickest way to the riverside.

In the brief moments where the underfooting didn't have him skidding, Landell would steal glances in the direction of the strangely still river. With trees clambering all over its slow flow, he wondered how it hadn't totally disappeared, dried up by the surrounding jungle. It didn't seem to connect to any other body of water. He decided it made no sense at all, kept alive by some nexus of geography beyond what was taught at public school. "Best to climb small hill... easier to get through jungle." As the Tamil flashed a smile full of perfect teeth, Landell felt disconcerted. And from the summit of a hill no more than two hundred metres high, flashing that smile again, the Tamil pointed down to stonework protruding from an overflowing

mesh of trees. “Kalabhra,” he announced. “Many know of Chola temples, but very few know of the Kalabhra special place.”

With the cool of elevation steadying his breathing, Landell tried to block thoughts of scented air-con blasting his limbs as he watched television and nodded gormlessly. “Is that Tamil? I mean which religion?” He pawed at his throat as it began to contract once more.

“It’s not so simple,” replied the guide, nodding as he plied his mouth with betel. “They came from somewhere else. Some say north, but I don’t think so. They allowed Buddha, Jain and Shiva.”

“Who were they?”

“They were their own people. They were scribes, and they rarely built. But they built in places not to be disturbed.” Landell felt his skull unwind as he drained his water bottle and followed his guide the few hundred metres and half an hour necessary to arrive at the temple walls. It was especially taxing. Beating branches away from his face left him unbalanced for the vines snatching at his ankles. Even as his guide separated the denser brush to clear a path, Landell felt his blood boiling as he cursed the inefficiency of the route taken.

A variety of rocks appeared, seemingly originating from very different places. Dark shales sat alongside granite and sandstone. The outer design was intricate but not showy. Landell dragged his hands along stones as he followed his guide through a recess in the outer wall. Set up on a dais sat the lounging stone image of pre-Buddhist origins. The hewn rock emitted a cutting combination of erosion and knowledge; behind the carving stood a ramrod straight statue of someone apparently vital. Landell had no idea who it was dedicated to but guessed that the hazy bust hanging above the other two sculptures was a representation of Shiva. Around the perimeter of the dais was a series of small carvings, blending with sandy patches of grass creeping over the temple’s foundations. The carvings were partly scripted in Sanskrit, partly animalistic. Landell couldn’t identify any of the creatures despite them all ringing bells. “How

to you know about this place?" he asked, regaining his breath while readying himself to file away information.

"Some man who lived in the jungle told me of its history, but he is now dead."

"So, how did he know?" Landell recognized his own impatience.

"This was not a temple of rules," replied the Tamil. "It was for anything, for anybody. But the people who came were usually silent: some artists, some thinkers. It was not about a certain group pretending they were free by wearing the same clothes and collecting together to gain force."

"How can you be sure he knew all these things?"

"Because he was a keeper, and keepers don't lie. They have no reason to."

"He could have still misremembered certain things he was told," suggested Landell.

"It's not possible, my friend. He was in the two per cent, even though he was dealing with the most ancient of knowledge." Looking up towards the Shivaite image, the Tamil held his right hand perpendicular to his forehead and swept it away in a flash.

"Two per cent?" Landell looked at his guide quizzically while holding his hand to his head to shield his eyes from the setting sun.

"Yes, the original two per cent, part of the source. The part that comes before the dilution. Once the dilution sets in, we're in the ninety-eight per cent of ignorance."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. And he was one of the two per cent that brings quality."

"Where did you learn English?"

"I didn't. I just read a dictionary as a child, sometimes."

"Why ninety-eight per cent?"

The Tamil guide paused, looked around the temple's interior and then up to the sun, which was frosting the horizon

as its power waned. "I don't know why. I'm just reporting on what I see."

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Landell shook his head once again at the offer of water from his guide, who smiled in disbelief as his tourist bled sweat. "Water is fine, my friend. The well was put there by the great Jain Shalibhadra. It is my honour to drink from this well."

Landell stared at the crumbling stone wall housing the water supply. "I'm sure you're right, but the Western stomach is not accustomed to such purity of water," he replied snidely.

"As you desire," drawled the Tamil. "Enjoy water they are pumping into your taps if you wish."

No other words were spoken as Landell was led towards a roadhead at a pace that had him straining but not complaining. With perspiration seeping into his eyes, he heard a rustle up ahead steadily levelling off. The guide was waving him towards a dried mud road, and he followed obediently as it widened into a patchwork of tarmac, asphalt and gravel. Standing at the side of the road, the two remained silent until the guide waved down a crawling prehistoric bus overflowing with untouchables. Landell looked on uneasily as the driver motioned his head in response to the Tamil's questions. "Get inside. You can sit beside the driver." There was urgency in his eyes.

"Mmm..." Landell looked up at a group of men clambering onto the bus's roof, which was already swaying with sacks of grain and smoking wallahs.

"This is the best you will do. The driver will take you to Kozhikode. From there, you can take the train to Cochin and beyond. The backwaters of Kerala are waiting for you."

"Thank you so much," replied Landell awkwardly. "Here, take this." The Tamil smiled and shook his head, holding his hands up as he walked away backwards, leaving Landell with a handful of notes fluttering in the early evening breeze.

"No. You misunderstand, sir," declared an agent as he brushed away stray samosa from his shirt pocket. "This is deluxe accommodation... overnight stay in luxurious houseboat, as frequented by your famous writer Kipling."

"I understand," snapped Landell. "And I asked you about booking the one-day trip from that other place you mentioned; the one beginning with an A."

"But backwater trip from Cochin is overnight only." The agent applied some flexion to his rotund girth.

"I'll take the bus to the other place and buy a ticket from you now." Landell was determined not to be side-tracked.

"Achhhh..." The agent turned in desperation, throwing his hands towards a map on a grimy prefabricated office wall. "I cannot book day trip from here. Just get ticket in Alappuzha. But you will miss the true experience of the backwaters."

The final lurch didn't register, and for once Landell could recall a negotiation in India with content as he sat in paralysis, three hours into a seven-hour trial through the blazing forest waters of Kerala. Two Danish women, a French couple and a lone German man had been snagged to make the lug's sputtering jaunt a profitable one. Landell sat by a small cabin, half in the shade, with one leg slowly cooking in sunlight barely regulated by a river breeze. He absentmindedly traced the lines of one of the Danes, a raven-haired athlete, as she plunged from the side of the boat into an area of water the captain had insisted was safe for Western activity. Landell felt ashamed at his lack of gamble. His ground-gazing recognition of falling at the final hurdle was eventually evaporated by the German's incessant grilling of the boat's captain over the matter of the engine's origin. He wanted a full rundown on its specifications, with serial numbers. Landell imagined himself reclining in sublimity, but before he could replicate some feeling he associated with his mind getting lost, the stark clench of sunburn clipped the inside of his left thigh. It looked amateurishly puce, a

sorry contrast to the richness of the farmer's tan covering his upper body. The athletic Dane was helping the French woman up onto the side of the boat by the time he'd re-focused. It was almost noon, and through a series of clumsy translations, the captain's assistant made it understood that they would be stopping off at a riverside ashram for lunch... to get away from the height of the sun.

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A table full of crystal shapes sat by the edge of a deck leading to an eating area. Nothing was said, but the hint of embittered market traders hung in the air as Landell inspected the pieces, their makers huddled together behind him with their two impossibly blond-haired kids, straight out of a Mengelian project. Coarse German hung in the air as his shipmates stalled over how much would be appropriate for the plate of rice and home-grown vegetables offered by the Ashram. The French man was badgering the half dozen white-robed devotees, determined to get the skinny on how this communal ship was kept afloat. He wanted numbers. Every few minutes, the riverboat captain and his assistant lit up another cigarette and edged closer to the pier, keen to bring their day's work home.

Landell found himself milling around the periphery of the ashram grounds, casting his eyes over bits and pieces of old machinery and wood remaining from construction work. Every few seconds he'd shoot a glance towards an opening in front of the main building, where the Danish women were deep in joyful commerce with the devotees responsible for manufacturing the crystals. Nobody was looking towards him. The air of mistrust that had initially greeted the boat was dissipating. Only the captain and his mate were divorced from proceedings. As he swept his eyes from character to character, wondering when the call to leave would come, Landell felt shards of nostalgia dripping from his thoughts, snippets of feelings he'd thought were gone forever, dependant on their source in real time. He



continued in a circling motion for what seemed an unreal amount of time until the raised voice of a Frenchman broke his drift. Glancing across the yard to see the Danish women still fingering crystals, pawing in anticipation of some energetic wonder they might emit, Landell silently cursed the fading streams of his past while imploring them not to completely disappear.

Upon boarding the boat at the first call from the captain, Landell looked around but couldn't make out the others loitering in the wrong places, a soul sale finalized with the purchase of a selection of crystals. The first tourist to join him was the French man, who launched into a rant, which Landell speculated was fuelled by his girlfriend's spending. "These places are just as bad as the shit governments peddle," he drawled. "*Toute la merde.*" He looked at Landell, a lazy threat protruding from his forehead, demanding a response.

"Yeh, it's not my scene," replied Landell disarmingly.

"It's the same." The Frenchman had been given enough rope. "Just a bullshit set of rules, and sheep obediently filing into position. Ah, you know what I mean. My English is no good."

"I don't know. The people seemed happy enough, though there was something off-putting about the mood."

"That's because these rules they have are just to offset the shit they are putting on their stupid followers." The Frenchman abruptly silenced himself as his girlfriend bounded aboard, followed by the two Danes. As the moorings were untied, Landell took one last look at the ideal. The boat pulled out, and a gimlet-eyes guru emerged from a small structure to the left of the ashram's main building. He watched the boat departing, his long white robe fluttering gently, with a fair-skinned young woman by his side.

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"Which side do you want? East part of beach is for tourists; right side for travellers." Landell moved into the shade

to avoid the sun's power. He looked at the well-fed local's lazy face calculating its quarry as he rubbed his hands clean on a purple t-shirt emblazoned with Che Guevara's image.

"I just want somewhere quiet," replied Landell.

"Varkala is shanti; don't worry." Landell blanched and begrudgingly followed his catcher down a mud-brick walled lane and through the back garden of a family of local women busy sorting through vegetables. He kept looking around, hoping the patches of yellow grass he occasionally spied would extend into something approximating a field, some place where he could service his fantasy of looking out onto nature from a window. But the one-storey dwellings kept coming thick and fast, weathered sandstone cottages sandwiching newer red-bricked bungalows referred to proudly by the locals as being "Western quality." Stray children emerged from gaps in walls before shrieking playfully and whipping around corners as some part of an unfathomable social ritual. After another five minutes of mazily traversing the innards of the cliff-top sprawl, Landell was led into the annex of a newish bungalow, where somehow a guest room had been contrived out of a misshaped storeroom. "This one is good for you, sir. Close to beach. Best price." The words came in ghoulish staccato. "How long will you be staying?"

"Just a few days."

"Stay longer for best price."

"Yeah. I need to rest." Landell was beaten.

"Okay, we can make good price later. Taking a rest, brother." Landell held up three fingers as he dropped his bag on the floor, nodding as the man's words swirled around his frontal lobes. The tourist was labelled a traveller by a host shamelessly massaging an ego that unbeknownst to him was at breaking point. The names of the restaurants where real travellers hung out didn't register with Landell as the man forced a window open through a mosquito wire before promising to have it fixed later that day. Landell collapsed, fully dressed, into a dirty sleep.

Deflected by a roadside café emitting a reggae beat, Landell found himself heading inland towards the outskirts of the small town of Varkala. Business was catching an inevitable flow: dusty shop-fronts receiving old paint upgrades, street vendors getting uppity and overweight women swarming around a four-shop outlet ambitiously named Central Mall.

Away from the main drag, Landell moved aimlessly, obliging himself to do the rounds in case there was something worth seeing, something that could work as a jump-off point for inspiration, or even an urban dweller whose desperate efforts to survive could inspire him into ladling humanistic prose into his latest attempt at writing. As his head began to drop, with glimpses of red advertisements providing a radar, the jaded rust bricks of a temple glided into view. It looked as if the entire surrounds had spilled from its steps, but the area was strangely bereft of activity. Without making a decision, Landell found himself slowly ascending the fifty or so steps that led from the quiet roadside to the upper reaches of the structure. At their summit, a weary cat stared him down and a spacious, empty courtyard opened up, with carved figures inset at head height featuring along walls muted with lost stories.

As he scoped the scene, a lush-bearded man in a black lungi emerged from a small door in the corner of the yard, carrying a sceptre and bucket. Landell didn't register with him as he drenched the steps leading down to the road with water to dampen the rising dust, leaving an air of practicality hanging over the yawning structure. And in that dusty mundanity, detached from the hordes down at the beach, the source of the surrounding settlement appeared to Landell in the image of the temple when it had been relevant to more than a set of greedy beliefs. In that swirl of truncated realization, he felt something he hadn't experienced since he first arrived in India, and only a couple of times previously, fading rapidly from his memory: a space between thoughts where only reality existed.

Like a dog marking out his imagined territory, Landell felt obliged to take a small flight of steps to another courtyard, this one at the western extremity of the temple. Wisps of fresh air infiltrated the higher reaches of the complex, lending it a different feel to the stifling atmosphere of the lower courtyards. Edging towards the corner, a veil of expectancy fell over him as he peered over a turret to the ground, some fifty feet below. The crown of a sadhu's head had no sooner come into focus than an orange swirl revealed gleaming teeth and an immediate latch onto Landell's eyes. "I will be there presently," the voice bellowed. Landell turned back to face the inner courtyard, scanning the perimeter of the structure in search for a handy breach in the wall, with a flight of steps miraculously providing an exit. In the few moments it took him to trace his eyes back to the way he'd come up, the sadhu was already in front of him, smiling broadly. "You are a special visitor," he exclaimed. Landell nodded, wearily shooting a glance at the holy man. "Ahh... I can see you think I'm tricking you." Landell nodded again, more slowly than before. "No, whether you believe or not, just coming here makes you special." Landell kept nodding, unable to bring his eyes to meet those of his accuser. "This is not a temple to any god, or many gods, but to life itself. It is predating all of the other temples in this area. "

"God," replied Landell.

"Ahhh. I knew you were special. You know there is no God. That thing people speak of is just another way of asking randomness to provide some luck."

"Is this your temple?"

"No, I don't have a temple any more. I've been rejected by other sadhus because of something I was taking."

"I thought you were allowed to smoke."

"Yes, my friend, but not ice." Landell's mind raced, searching for ways to steer the conversation back to safe ground while maintaining his new role of bedazzled searcher.

"So, my friend."

“So,” replied Landell. “You are Brahmin caste. How can they reject you?”

“Ah, the old way is dying.”

“Really?” Landell pushed his bottom lip out.

“Well of course, there is caste everywhere. You have queen and lords and then politicians and workers. These all caste.”

“Well, it’s not the same as...”

“Of course it’s the same.”

“No. There’s movement within my society.” Landell heard himself talking. Momentarily, he was a listener to his own words.

“There is movement in all societies my friend, but it doesn’t mean shit.” Landell felt himself edging towards the steps down to street level. As he put one foot ahead of another in a near nauseous daze, a barely audible parting shot registered with him: “Do you need something to smoke, my friend?”

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With a teenage sense of anticipation, Landell buttoned up his last remaining clean shirt and headed out of his guesthouse for a sunset walk. Speeding through the jigsaw of narrow streets leading towards the beach front, he caught sight of himself in a rickshaw’s wing mirror and was surprised to see a dusty tan settling into his face. With a smile, he cut away from the cliff-top drag of cafes and towards the lower slopes leading to the south side of the beach, which he assumed would be more authentic.

There was nothing you could call a spot. People had situated themselves in intervals of a few feet to catch a glimpse of their temporary god. Jugglers, dancers and fire-throwers lay in wait towards the back of the beach for the horizon’s gold to turn an angry red. Landell kept on walking, pausing from time to time to gauge the space between the sunsetters, approximating the chances of being able to view the stratified shades of sunset without anyone in his peripheral vision. And he kept on walking,

all the way to the jagged mounds of calcified coral that demarcated the end of the beach. Even there, a couple of tourists were perched on a lower section of rocks, a few feet apart, posturing uncomfortably as they peered into the distance.

Landell was labouring, his palms becoming increasingly roughed up by the uneven surface of the mounds as he dragged himself to its summit, some thirty feet above the beach. With thighs jammed into the rockface to maintain his balance, he managed to catch a glimpse of another short stretch of beach. There seemed to be movement at its far end before a sheer rock face blocked any view of the remaining coastline. As he caught his breath, realizing he hadn't planned on scaling down the other side of the coral mounds, a whisper nearly caused him to lose his balance. "So, you made it to the other side. What do you think?" An unshaven, heavily tanned man of about thirty-five with a mid-Atlantic accent stared sideways at Landell from about ten feet away, leaning casually against the rock face and blasting plumes of smoke straight up into the air.

"Yeah. I was wondering if there was another beach. Does anybody else know about it?"

"A few people, including that movement you can see by the rock face."

"I wasn't sure what that was." Landell looked for a route down while trying to appear at ease.

"Oh yeah. They think they discovered the beach. They have their Om circle around this time. Funny thing is they keep trying to swear me to secrecy. They're afraid people from the other side of this here rock will find out." He inhaled deeply again before thrusting his chillum in the direction of Landell.

"Err, how do I get to where you are?"

"Just crawl over the rocks and eat the pain. From here, it's easy to get down to the beach."

"Right, I..."

"Come get some of this into you, and I'll tell you all about the other beach... the one that nobody knows about." Landell scrambled awkwardly to draw on a cool chillum, pawing at his

cut knees from time to time until the pain subsided. It seemed different to any other chillum he'd smoked. It fit in his hand, and there was no residue left on his lips. "No *safi* I'm afraid mate, but you can make the right shape with your thumb." Three sharp hits were enough to have Landell's thoughts separating frantically as he relaxed. Looking around, the darkness was punctuated by shards of purple light, but he couldn't locate the Sun. "I'm Ev," stated the hushed voice, reading the situation. "I always like the sun to set behind me, out of sight."

"I might go down to the beach here and see a quiet sunset for a change," replied Landell, raising his eyebrows in friendly disconnection.

"Yeh, you could do that. Or you could stay up here and avoid the fashion show."

"No. I meant I would go to this side of the beach." Landell pointed towards an empty stretch short of the Om circle.

"Yeh," drawled Ev. "That's still part of the fashion show. Up here is one of the few places left in this area where you can catch a genuine sunset."

"But I can't see it from here," protested Landell. Ev pointed towards the head of a trail leading down to the empty beach and smirked. Landell hesitated, cowed by the belief that he may be giving up a real experience whichever way he chose.

"It's all part of the same fashion show... just different costumes."

"Sorry?"

"It doesn't matter which beach you're on or what clothes you're wearing. It's just people being people, doing whatever is necessary to enhance their sense of social worth."

"I think some of us just like sunsets."

"Then why come here. There are beautiful sunsets on the sides of highways. This place is as much about status as a New England country club. Ultimately, it's irrelevant if their get-ups are contrived or not."

"Well. I don't know about that. Some people just want to take a photograph of something beautiful."

“Don’t get me started on photo junkies,” replied Ev.

“What’s wrong with taking photographs?” asked Landell.

“Nothing... so long as an obsession with snapping everything around you isn’t because you’re ill-equipped to log memories.” Landell looked at the empty beach once again, tracing his eyes up to the now bowing Om circle and back over his shoulder in search of strands of sunset gold. “Come on. Let’s go down to the busy beach. I’ll show you a secret path behind this mound. It’ll be a good laugh now. We get to see the indignant delusion of designer tourists who think the locals are trying to fuck them by adding five cents onto the price of a drink they have hauled two miles over a hill from the closest village. Trust me: it’s never a let-down.”

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



I was back in the lowlands, my sense of sobriety slightly mitigated by altitude gain and the prospect of looping back towards even higher climes. I felt beyond detox: I knew I could easily burn my way through Nepal without a smoke, but I was even more confident I could blaze my way through the Himalaya smoking up a storm. High on expectation, I turned off an empty road before Bagadi Hat to follow a river across the border towards Pali. I could probably have breezed by the checkpoint as bored soldiers drank cheap hooch and played emotive card games. On another day, I would have hitched a ride to the official border crossing seventy miles down the road. But on that day, I'd decided that walking backwards through an official border crossing a few weeks later would pose no problems. Anyway, I was still harbouring delusions of freedom. Entering Nepal from this point would be considered a suicide mission by many, but it was too good an opportunity to miss. I'd already learned never to pass up the chance of a new experience when you're unlikely to be in that same spot again. As the burr of random industry induced a rudderless nostalgia in me, I considered if it was latent racism that caused me to fondly ponder obsolete machinery while despising clinical East Asian technology, or whether it was a matter of eras and being attracted to anything that came from a time I associated with spaciousness.

As I turned northwards in an effort to quietly slip over the border into remotest Tibet through valleys rumoured to have once contained the perfect symmetry between bounty and seclusion, I felt an intrepid peacefulness. The last feint mechanical burrs only served to anchor the peace, as did the shades and colours in front of me. I was going off-road now towards Sunsera, and apart from the occasional stretch of mud, seasonally navigable by non-existent four-wheel drives, it would be a couple of weeks until I witnessed a road again. It was with relief that I headed towards the grassy highlands, a sense of finally being without direction, mapless and painless.

While I tried to figure out what I could add to my oatmeal to fool myself dinner was different to lunch, I was startled to see a

teenage boy shadowing my path. Wearing red, he paused every time I shot a glance in his direction. I couldn't work out where he was going, unless the catchpool of the last village I'd seen extended farther than I thought due to the emptiness of the land. I romantically convinced myself that he was the last in an unbroken line of pilgrims to Zhang Zhung.

I knew fuck all about this ancient land, bar that it had once been a cradle of rest for the zig-zagging thoughts of pilgrims, but I'd vague memories of a nutty uncle telling me of Kyunglung being the last remaining proof of the land everyone was looking for. It was still gnawing at me that instead of blowing through Puh and into China from India, I had to come all the way around to sneak in from the rear to avoid trigger-happy protectors of the motherland. With these minor annoyances swirling around my cranium, I lolled northwards towards the border and into the Burang region, wondering if Red Boy was going to get close enough to initiate some awkward sign language. But he was beginning to lag, no doubt curious as to what the long-faced if now brown stranger was up to. In my ignorance, I assumed he may have copped me for a blended Central Asian.

The funny thing about being stalked, whether by phone or by highland, is when it suddenly stops you're left with a feeling of rejection that you try to rationalize away as being weirded out. Maybe it's a weaker version of the universal pain of disconnection, or the death of the utopian stalker fantasy. When I turned to look back at the rolling hills behind me, I saw Red Boy waving from the safe distance of a mountain away. I smiled, assuming somehow he could detect it, and held my hand up. Then I turned around and headed north, guessing at which mountain in the distance contained the imaginary line men get hung up on.

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I was through and busy trying to temper the adrenaline rush propelling me onwards for fear of crashing suddenly before I reached a settlement to stock up on provisions. I tried to imagine the people, their faces and responses, to a wild long-pig like me carousing around their valleys. They were just down the river from where I'd crossed the highway outside Puh, but that didn't tell me

much. In these ripples of the lower Himalaya, valleys of no more than a few miles apart separated ethnicity, religion and ways of life. There might have been a curious harmony amongst the creeping infliction of a dominant group's reality on the weaker peoples around them. But many of these peoples had once been great. They were the remnants of tribes that had risen and fallen and left a trove of information and thought for those to come after them: branches of Celts, Lepchas, Mon, Turks and Tokharian had mingled with Ladakhis and the Bon-inspired antecedents of the people who still lived in the area I was now walking towards, the Sotlej Valley. As I looked into the middle distance, I could see traces of the Sotlej river, or perhaps one of its minor tributaries, appearing and disappearing—a modern-day reminder of the aridification that had almost but not quite obliterated all traces of the lush green land that once existed between high silvery snowfields of the Himalaya. The radical climate change was relatively recent. A strong oral tradition of storytelling, often more reliable than the written word, could still school me as to the way things were just a thousand years ago. And it didn't take much in the way of extrapolation and imagination to trace back to the inspiration of Sharambala, and all it left in the minds of those from everywhere.

At first, it came into view like a hackneyed mirage, its silver dome creeping out from under a cloud and leaving me questioning my eyesight. But by the time I'd established the incision left by the Sotlej as it wended its way through the valley up ahead, it was undoubtedly Kailash lording over the confluence of cultures I was skirting around. Even as my gnawing scepticism attempted to tag it as just another pretty snow-covered mountain, its ability to convince people of the tallest stories was enveloping me. It simply looked magical. And as I traced my eyes back to the foreground of the Sotlej's hinterland, I caught my first glimpse of the dusty ruins of Kyunglung. Steadying my gaze, I soon had both of these giants in parallax to what I imagined were the remnants of a basin once perfectly carved by its river. Colouring in the sand with green, and positioning a few trees and waterfalls in the correct spots, and I easily made a believer of myself. I just as quickly dismissed my fancy as being attainable just about anywhere, but for some reason I'd acquired an image way more convincing than all the tourist spots and hotels across the Himalaya that so readily adopted the name of

*Sharambala*. With these figures, both real and imagined, firmly in my sight, I marched on towards the Sutej, higher than an awestruck child.

There was no sign of humanity, and with the Sun beginning to crack the clouds, I didn't even register the usual reflexive thought of recording the moment. My mind was nowhere near blocked enough to act as a filter for the future requested proof that undermines the now. Within minutes I was tentatively pressing forward between two small ox bow lakes, paranoid that the passably soggy ground would somehow open up into a medieval swamp of death. With no more than an irritating dampness creeping through my running shoes, I arrived at a bend in the river, which was now flowing at a decent clip. As I stood there, wondering why stepping stones hadn't been positioned in this obvious spot, I heard a rustle to the west. A spry man of about fifty came into view, his eyes never lifting from the ground until he pulled up directly across from me, separated by about ten yards of river. He slowly raised his head and locked eyes with mine, neither uttering a word nor expressing any sign of discord. "Where from?" he said calmly. I looked around and pointed over my shoulder back towards the border. "You stay here." I wasn't sure if it were an invitation or an inquisition. "You cross here." He seemed to be giving me the giddy-up.

"If possible," I replied.

"Possible. Take off shoes." I took them off, as well as my socks, and rolled my trousers above my knees before wading across the deceptively testy river. He plucked my backpack from my outstretched arms, and I pulled myself up onto a piece of land that thousands had furiously searched for and failed to locate because of treating time like a straight line instead of the ripping swirl that somebody clever told me it is. As I put my shoes back on, he inspected me nonchalantly before getting straight to the point. "Do you come from past, present or future?"

"I'm here now."

"Ahh," he blurted. "I hope for you. You must always be coming from past, present and future."

"What?" I found myself looking around for witnesses.

"I think you hear me." Not expecting to get got right off the bat, I dizzily put my shoes back onto wet feet. The first thing I noticed after crossing the river was that the aches I'd been carrying

had disappeared—I wasn't sure when. But now that I wasn't walking alone, I began to notice how clear the air was, even when compared to other areas I'd passed by over the previous weeks. Everything seemed to fit: the air, the shape of the river, the spacing between the small abodes in the distance and the bigger amphitheatre that it was all nestling in. "I mean it is always best to be living now and in the past and the future." I looked more closely at his face. I'd never seen one like it. It had some semblance of the peace you see in a Tibetan's expression, but none of the self-serving roundness. His features were neat yet full of character: his eyes almond shaped, his straight nose very slightly flared at the nostrils and his chin strong and symmetrical. You could almost be fooled into thinking he was a perfect fusion of Ladakhi, Lepcha and Londoner... but there was definitely something singular about his visage. It obeyed all the rules of Nature. "You can stay in the village," he offered. I followed silently as he led the way.

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"She want know if you jump mountain."

"No. I just walked." I watched the teenage girl giggle in disbelief. Her uncle, the only person in town who spoke English, nodded serenely as his sister and niece blazed their eyes in disbelief. With an unlikely pride, the woman of the house ushered me towards the bedroom she had made up, making sure it was to my satisfaction. I nodded and smiled broadly before turning to my translator, who thanked her and motioned me back to the cushions on the floor. We were to have a special smoke and talk before the night was done.

"They still think you are a mountain jumper," he whispered as he passed me a water pipe. I put it to my lips and drew steadily until it filled my lungs. It was as smooth a hit as you could wish for.

"I'm just a jumped-up rambler," I replied while smoke billowed around me.

"No friend, don't be mistaken. Mountain jumper is great praise." I nodded and widened my eyes. "Yes," he continued. "These days we don't meet them. Once, even our own men were mountain jumpers, bringing back the secrets of the Bon. But now we only have stream jumpers."

“Stream jumpers?”

“Yes, you know the person who is jumping on the latest thing... what is word?”

“Fashion?”

“Yes yes,” he confirmed, though I think he would’ve endorsed whichever word I’d used.

“Eastern fashion or Western fashion?” I asked.

“Both possible, but most Eastern. Do you have stream jumpers in your country?”

“Oh yes.” I nodded with heavy eyes. “We have plenty.”

“We have had them here for a long time too.”

“How long?”

“More than ten years.” He shuffled in his cushions as he began to empty the pipe bowl.

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The bad thing about being the only Westerner in town was that the authorities were going to find out soon enough. In India, this would probably pass over with minor baksheesh, but things were different in what was technically China. I’d breached the motherland like a disobedient cur confused by the threat of a passing big man. India, for all its bureaucracy, somewhat saw itself as being part of Nature, at least from my transient viewpoint. The good news was the closest police station was six hours away and the local informer was my host, who assured me she’d made a lifetime’s habit out of only telling the authorities what they needed to know. I still didn’t plan on spending more than a few days in the area as some random dipshit was bound to take it on himself to enquire as to what an outsider was doing there, as if there were any mystery to it.

For the second morning in a row, I spent my time walking with my host’s brother. I learned that his name was Geshan and he possessed a healthy scepticism of just about everyone, especially me and my tales of searching for the source of a local legend. He fobbed me off with unerring pleasantness most of the time, but every so often a kind of bittersweet slant would hit his lips as he attempted to frame childhood recollections of village elders recounting history to him. Each time I felt I’d transgressed on his

more personal memories, I'd drift back to talk of mountain names or the former extent of the fort at Kyunglung. In moments of clarity, I'd realise I was just another version of the laughable tourists going over an extra mountain pass or lowland detour in search of the way places once were. It was the promise of future reward masquerading as something lost but still within grasp. I had a sudden realization that this may be our last walk together. "So," I blurted as we chivvied up a hill trail. "You can tell me now."

He smiled again. "There's nothing to tell."

"Tell me about nothing please," I replied. And the moment I let go, he started to speak, describing events in such an even flow that if it weren't for his easy timbre I would've written it off as some affectation. I barely had to prompt him as he continued speaking, explaining in depth the veracity of the oral history that had been passed down through the millennia and how he laughed at the clinical ignorance of the scholars who traipsed through his homeland from time to time, completely missing the truth everywhere around them. I tried not to prod clumsily, but my one-word questions would confuse him. Why was I interested in the changing course of the river? What was my obsession with dates? And why was I always trying to reach sources, whether they related to people, places or ideas?

I still think back to that last conversation with Geshan, although now I can barely remember any of its content. The mood of the morning still hangs with me, still strong if now only fleeting. But the one thing I remember clearly is him informing me that just because the high llamas put a beat on the Bon in the mystical wars on the ground, that didn't mean their story contained more truth, even if it did in the eyes of most people. It was often random factors that determined the sway of a belief system, from timing and external forces to political jockeying and support from the deluded masses.

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The incessant pitter-patter of rain on corrugated iron rooftops can somehow dissolve the sullen slant of grey skies, especially when the wind picks up... auguring an incoming storm. And as I pushed off Rara Lake and on towards the greenery of Shey

Park in Western Nepal, I was accompanied every step of the way. I hadn't quite figured out how certain thinkers fit with particular seasons, but I was in no doubt that Al Biruni had me caught in the storms of autumn. I tried to dredge up what it was he'd lit me up with, but I could only access the feel of his polymathic glow. There was some writing on the subcontinent, which was supposed to be a big deal, but I knew shamefully little of what he'd reported. I did still myself, however, trying to synthesize his legacy with the prevailing weather in an effort to guide me on my way. Every so often I'd get a flash of some educational tourists desperately trying to glean the remnants of quality from a frieze in Khajuro or Belapur. I'd no idea why others' attempts at immersion jarred so acutely. I kept on walking, barely registering the countryside around me but still enveloped by it. By now, my thoughts were focused firmly on the marketplace of Deurali and its weekly hash bonanza. It was if I were walking down a tunnel eyes first as I looked past the raindrops to the mizzle in the distance.

As I reached the outskirts of the village, I saw men milling outside a dhaba. Famished but propelled by the endless sustenance of the mountain air, I only glanced at their faces as I stepped inside and asked for a thali. Waiting, I refocused my eyes on the group of five men standing outside. It was like looking at five varieties of Englishman: one with pinched features like a ferret's, another chewing open-mouthed, a third looking into the distance like a ruminating farmer, the next inspecting his glasses scientifically and the one farthest away from me flashing the menacing smile of an avuncular merchant. Only their skin tones were different. Their socializations had left imprints on their faces showing their positions in the game. I demolished the thali within a minute, much to the delight of the motherly cook. She scooped generous seconds onto the tray against my protests. I didn't want to over-reach myself: I had business to take care of.

At first glance, it looked like amateur hour. Small hills of frilly buds lay exposed on plastic mats. I'd never thought I was a stickler for maximizing utility, but I came over all German at the sight of mountains of marijuana losing power in the open air. One vendor assured me that the crystallized atmosphere of the high Himalaya was good for the bud. Another, in between lauding the strange apricot tang to his smoke, gave credit to an unnameable



plant that grew close to the cannabis plantations. It wasn't until later I noticed the open jam jars cluttered all over the place.

One of the disadvantages of not dressing like a crusty is dealing with cannabis sellers—they usually peg you for a real mover and want to sell to you in kilos instead of grams. Any hint that you just want a couple of tolas for the chilly mountain nights meets with surly disappointment. The only thing to do is to insist you need to check their wares before committing to a big investment, but then the old-timers want to give it to you for free. It's important to resist the urge to take a free hit. Pay and you play the way you want to. Take it for free and you'll have jumped-up shepherds banging on your door at sunrise demanding big business while voraciously eying the interior of your room.

I walked around the inner square of the market one more time, hoping to lock eyes with the wizened vendor who I'd earlier noticed rubbing his white whiskers with the back of his hand and saving his fingers for picking off soft nuggets from his blocks of tawny hashish. He turned to meet my glance, his face set against a dull shade provided by a raggedy canopy fluttering above him, and did the revealing upwards nod that let me know we were cool. I walked over to him and sat down, half yogic and half lazy foreigner, supported by an outstretched elbow. He said nothing, instead continuing to package his wares in perfect shapes: cylinders, rectangles, circular chapatis and even an Olmec-style trapezium. He worked at an even pace, devoid of any jarring emotions or ungainly interfacing. Steadily, he continued, lifting his eyes towards me intermittently to see where I was focused. My sceptical bent was considering whether this oneness with his work was some kind of grand hustle, but as he slid a node of hash towards me with the tip of his index finger without looking up, I was desperate to be taken in. Whatever extra I might have had to pay, the premium of solid made the real way, undoubtedly without after-effects, was not going to be missed. Bar silly requests, I was going to hand him what he wanted. I fished in my rucksack for the fake credit card holder for the first time in weeks, and within a minute I was pulling on some of the cleanest hash I'd tasted. It was made by someone who'd refined his roll over decades. I was just about to lament its lack of indica boom, when the wobble hit me. The soft tarry texture with streaks of golden brown running through it was giving me a more

natural hit than I'd ever experienced. You'd only wish to get involved with this if you really wanted to get high.

"How many tolas?" he asked in barely audible English.

"Kitne?" I replied.

"How many tolas you want?"

"Not much money. Only five, I think."

"Twenty hundred rupees," he replied.

"It's costly."

He shook his head and then for the first time looked directly at me. The creases around his eyes steadily swam towards an intelligent mouth. "It's not costly." I plucked four five-hundred notes from my wallet and smiled as I handed them to him. They disappeared under his shirt, away from the creeping baksheesh-obsessed hands of local policemen. As I stood up, he palmed half a tola of darker hash into my fist and nodded upwards one more time.

When I reached the edge of the market place, I turned around to frame a picture of it in my mind. All I can remember now was the unlikely diagonal setting around a trading post on an equally impossible plateau of land sitting silently against a backdrop of sheer mountain rises and criss-crossing hills. It seemed as if time had obviated the need for such a natural setting to take precedence, whether for trade, worship or wonder. As I walked away, I caught glimpses of another few eerily mundane faces, spinning me back to outliers in England, individuals prone to be slagged off for daring to maintain a visage out of kilter with the stratified masses. I still couldn't decide whether it was genes, language or social construct over large sample sizes that had created such duplicates.

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"Just get out of your own way, and Nature will inform you." His voice was clipped yet casual, assured in the truth it was spewing towards me. I barely had the energy to fight it off, especially as I accepted that on my best days I'd caught a glimpse of the same lake he was dredging. But I'd beaten the less beaten track hard for the previous few days, camping in spots frequented by wolves that had mercifully given me a pass for encroaching on their land, my mind steeped in the gold I'd procured at the market in Deurali, ready to

be taken by any of Nature's tentacles, confident I wouldn't feel a thing. "You don't believe me, sir."

"I never said that." I looked straight down the curve in the road, the newly laid tar lending my feet an airy bounce after days of forcing them over uneven mountain trails.

"If I wanted to cheat tourists, I would be in Pokhara," he added.

"We're only a few miles away." I was measuring the bends in the road, peering down the barrel of the gradient as it fed towards the lakeside retreat of Pokhara.

"No, brother. I can see you have come from the mountain. That's why I want to speak to you."

"Trying to catch me while I'm weak. You should be ashamed of yourself, brother."

He frowned and exhaled through his nose. "You misunderstand me, brother. I like talking to people who come down from the mountain. Their minds are ready."

"I've been in the mountains for five weeks; not just these mountains, but all the way to Ladakh." I felt like a prized dick.

"Ahh... my brother, you are a real traveller."

"Fuck no. I'm a tourist, just like everyone else here."

"But you are not taking a bus to Pokhara. You are walking there like a real sadhu."

I looked at him with an over-the-top suspicious gaze. "When's the last time a real sadhu has been in Pokhara?"

"Acha. You are right brother. But let me accompany you for some of your walk. We can exchange ideas." As I checked out his facial features, I could see he had a classic Indo-Aryan visage, an almost perfect snapshot of the once mighty Brahmin caste that had slowly dissipated over the centuries in the valleys of Nepal, their hold almost gone but the memories of those who had somehow known the power of nothing and infinity, the return to dust and other untold truths still informed his ramblings. Crow's feet and a parched face revealed more about the millet-distilled alcohol he was caning on the sly than the aridity of his homeland. "The best you can do is to wait around the correct places," he asserted.

"Where? In Pokhara?"

“Anywhere, brother.” We were within a few miles of the lake now. I could tell by the increase in traffic: at least one vehicle every two minutes.

“What is your English word... lotter?”

“Lottery,” I replied, feeling I’d made a reasonable guess.

“Loiter, loiter in the right places.” I listened to the words as my eyes were dragged off road to a deep brown copse of trees. I wanted to know their name, but for what reason? I’d already tagged them in my mind, the way they absorbed the Sun and sat in their place, seemingly oblivious to the newly laid road wreaking havoc on their senses. I reminded myself of the three stages, unsure of whether I’d heard them from someone else or from myself in one of my various states: intention, attention and retention. The Sun was now beating down on the tar and on my head. But mountain freshness prevented that heavy feeling of impending dehydration as the outskirts of the town lent a commercial flux to the receding nature. “Maybe when we succeed, we’re just lucky,” he stated solemnly.

I smiled at the lottery and whispered the word “random” to him while winking repetitively.

“Why are you going to Pokhara, brother?” he continued.

“It’s just a pit stop. And then I’ll have another pit stop in Kathmandu. And that’ll be the last one I ever take.”

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“I’m staying off lakeside. It’s more chilled out there.”

“Really.” I wasn’t in the mood to eat this shit again. Same story, different spot.

“Yes. Are you staying on the main drag?”

“Nah. I stay over that mountain there.” I pointed towards the biggest hill in town.

“How do you get here,” she asked while rubbing one of her bare feet with the other.

“I walk.” By her tweaked expression, it seemed as if I’d offended her. I wasn’t sure if she’d mistaken my matter-of-factness about marching over a mountain every time I needed something for a rejection of the off-the-main-tourist-trap scene. I wasn’t as it went, but I just couldn’t delude myself into following the tourists

who believed that this made-to-order scruffy enclave was an authentic offshoot of local culture. It didn't emanate from the source. The proprietors were blow-ins and responding to the latest misunderstanding of reality from tourists determined to be seen as questers. I retreated back over the mountain before I offended anyone else.

Later that day, I strolled down to the western reaches of Lakeside to stock up on provisions and to see if I could spot any of the old shopkeepers and kerb hustlers I'd known from a few years back. Rain was threatening as a purple grey sky began to merge with the masked mountains. Even the cows were uneasy: one had broken into an ungainly trot, which had a few others cocking their heads before returning to their usual cool ruminations. It wasn't until I hit the first houses on the edge of the tourist build-up that I saw anyone else outside. It was as if everyone had some information I didn't. Either rain was coming hard or I'd just stumbled into a synchronised smoke-off that had all the other whiteys indoors.

As I stood at a small kiosk ordering lighters, papers and chocolate for the night ahead, considering if I'd bother walking further into the belly of the tourist beast when almost everything of value had been eradicated years before bar the serenely watchful trees outside the Snow View Hotel, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I looked around and tried to place the face. Its deep wrinkles betrayed one who had lived less than forty years. His genuine smile triggered something in me. I knew he knew me, but I wasn't sure if I just thought I knew him. "It's me... Boulay."

I traced my mind back to the years before and some lonely café where a Nepalese manchild entertained English searchers with silly stories and promises of brokering a real deal for the premium indica. It was him. "Hey. How's life, Boulay?"

"Yes, it's okay. I have my own place now. Full of tourists: come with me, friend."

"I'll come later. I've got some business to do."

"Just a quick drink."

As I sat in Boulay's makeshift café sipping a lemon lassi while averting my eyes from the other tourists sprawled on pillows and mattresses, I was approached by a bronze-eyed Brahmin who had a good sense for a mark, even if he wasn't selling anything for

cash. He did away with any pleasantries and got right into it. "They think they are different." I nodded. He was handsome in an embittered way. "They criticize the rich tourists for showing off their social status in expensive hotels and jeeps, but they are doing the same thing here."

"This place is cheap, boss."

"I'm not talking about their money. It's about their view of themselves; that they are somehow more real than richer tourists. But they are all tourists."

"You mean they're all basking in that part of their brain. The cortex something or other."

He turned and looked at me, seething with knowledge. "Yes. I knew you'd know." I probably should have got into it more with him as he had one of those faces I'd never forget, but instead I slammed the rest of my lassi down, signalled to Boulay that I'd be back later and smiled as he awkwardly stuck to a crew sharing a tobacco-laden joint.

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The next time I trundled towards the outskirts of the village, it was to score real weed by mistake at the crossroads. I almost got lost in my hook up's relentless sell. "Why you walking every day, brother?" This hustler's natural handsomeness was unerring. Perfect shoulder-length hair framed a bronzed face hewn from truth.

"Because that's what I am meant to do, brother."

"Why do I always see you walking here, brother?"

"Probably because you are always hanging around here, brother."

"This my cousin's shop, brother."

"Well, I see brother. Good for you and your family."

"Thank you, brother."

"You are welcome, brother."

"Do you have a light, brother?"

"Of course, brother." I produced a cheap lighter from my pocket and lit his cigarette while he cupped it from a non-existent breeze.

"Thanks, brother. You are a smoker." I shook my head.

“Why do you have lighter then, brother?”

“Sometimes you need a lighter, brother.”

“So you never smoke, brother?”

My head was dinging like a stuck bell. “Only on special occasions, brother.”

“What do you smoke brother?”

“Only the best stuff, brother.” I angled my gaze theatrically and winked.

“Does brother need something now?”

“Only if it’s the best, and best price of course.”

“Of course, brother. Come with me.” Now it was just a case of how much he was going to try to fuck me and how much I was going to resist until he wore me down. But this time I was lucky. His bloodshot eyes weren’t lying. He was so fucking caned he picked up the wrong bag of grass from behind his brother’s closet in a Spartan one-room at the back of an old house up a rundown lane of piss-poor abodes.

The next afternoon as I was getting stuck into a plate of finger chips, my brother of the previous day plonked down beside me with a frantic look in his eyes. He wasn’t stoned on this day. He got straight to the point. “I gave you the wrong one yesterday.”

“What?” I replied while focusing on getting the lukewarm chips into me before they went cold.

“I gave you the wrong weed.” He leaned into me.

“Shhh.” I looked around with fake concern.

“I need it back. My brother is angry.”

“Business was completed yesterday in good faith, my brother.”

“But it was mistake.”

“Why... Was I not supposed to get high?”

“I have other good one.” His handsome face and shoulder length mane were beginning to look strangely tragic as he tried to plead with menace.

“Why don’t you have some finger chips,” I offered while recalling how his wares had had me magnetised to my bed for most of the previous day.

“Do you still have it?” His urgency was pathetic.

“Listen boss. Get real. I smoked it all last night.” He looked hurt. “It was okay,” I continued. “I was going to buy some more off

you, but coming at me like this isn't cool. I thought we were brothers."

"Okay man. Cool. I can get you more, but it's going to be five hundred a tola."

"That's way too costly." I smiled as I saw my expression registering in his face. I'd mithered him to distraction on the previous day with my insistence that every price he quoted was costly. This was probably the only time in all my dealings with street sellers that I felt sympathy for one. I suppose it was like any other occupation: a small percentage of them were good at what they did, most were mediocre and bluffing their way through, and a hefty proportion was simply clueless. But he was a decent sort. I didn't want to fuck him over, and I still wasn't sure I had; maybe he was a method actor of the mountains. As he stood up and retreated defeated, his steely gaze not getting the response he'd expected, I imagined what alleyway he would now go down. If he was a failure as a street seller, would he be doomed to a life of manual labour for a pittance? He was more playboy than worker. Despite his winning smile and golden charm, the main thing that remains with me was that look in his eyes, another disappointment he'd have to pick himself up from when even a few days of respite was unattainable in the cold world he lived in, never mind actually realizing your dream one day. He had no idea I was stubbornly fighting the universality of his feeling from etching itself onto my face.

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I hitched back to a town close to the edge of Chitwan National Park. I can't remember its name now, but it was something like Malkieganj, and it was a safe enough distance away from the border to avoid suspicion. I was going to have to follow a loop along the edge of the park and over the border, sticking to the trails animals take. Luckily, the official spiel about tigers and charging rhinos was a tourist ruse, but I'd no idea what may be waiting in the reeds to jack me if I relaxed too much. I kept an attuned eye on my surroundings while trying to emit a vibe of just passing through and not looking for any trouble. The comedic value of rocking right up to the border checkpoint and brazenly walking through and back was receding with the belief that such an



approach might actually work. Besides, a twenty-dollar baksheesh hit would be plenty in all likelihood, but you never know when you're going to run into a straight border guard. And at least now I could check another must-see off the list of sites I'd been avoiding for the previous three months.

With dusk falling, I edged out of the park and towards hazy fields where middle-aged women were baling straw and laughing boldly as the Sun finally disappeared below an amber horizon. The spaces were wide open. Visibility was a couple of miles, but I'd no way of knowing where the border might be. I kept expecting to see a river, or at least a ramshackle border post with a local donning a tatty military uniform. But there was nothing but contented lowlanders in garish reds and yellows, completing their last few tasks before retiring for the night with the promise of another day in the fields ahead of them.

I walked on, looking for a sign that would tell me I was approaching or had passed the border. With my eyes adjusting to the near blackness, I saw crouching figures up ahead. They were women by a riverbank, rinsing clothes by moonlight. I slid by them, careful to keep my face tilted away from their eyes. After about one hundred yards, I saw stepping stones. In darkness, I traversed the water and looked back towards the women, who were now standing and balancing bundles on their heads. I quickened my step and headed across a field. I wasn't two minutes into India when I met a protector of the land. "Where going?"

"Jesus Buddha," I whispered. I'd thought I might be addressed in Hindi in that light.

"Hellooo." My lifelong strategy of ignoring problems until they went away was failing me. I kept on, hoping his threshold for boredom was somewhere near mine, but that was wishful thinking. Tracing my eyes over the dark fields in front of me, I checked for swamps or other dangers while taking in the sweep of unblemished trails before I was clawed back into some self-appointed watcher's misunderstanding of reality. He was close enough behind me now that I began to finger in my pockets for an army knife... just in case. "You are violating the sanctity of India," he declared.

"I'm just crossing a field, you fucking tool."

"What is this 'fucking' word for?" He was instantly on the moral highground.

“It’s just an adjective. Don’t worry about it.”

“Nevertheless, I am requiring to see your papers.”

“I will be requiring to see your ID first,” I replied. I nodded, my face contorted in absurd admonishment.

“But I am the area inspector.”

“But how do I know, sir. There are a lot of dacoits and charlatans these days. It is your duty to furnish me with your ID. Upon receipt of this, I can show you my papers.”

He exhaled through his nose heavily. “I must insist,” he mumbled. But my ridiculous racist-tinged rant struck a chord deep in his bureaucratic training.

“Show me your ID so I can be sure you’re not trying to trick me.” He exhaled again, this time more tamely. Clinically, I produced fifty rupees from my pocket and handed it to him. “For your rickshaw home.” He accepted it and stood still as I disappeared into the darkness.

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I smiled as the immigration officer went through my passport one more time. For some border control agents it was just pure nosiness, but others were desperate to find a stamp of a country they considered unsavoury with a view to parlaying it into an excuse for declining a visa and ultimately to what this dance was all about: baksheesh. He held it tense between his thumb and index finger and flicked through the pages one more time like a child with a stickman album. He inspected me closely with bullying eyes. “Where have you visited in India?” he demanded.

“Delhi, Agra, Rajasthan.”

“What was the purpose of your visit?”

“Tourism.”

“And why are you visiting Nepal?”

“To see temples in Kathmandu and Mount Everest.” He stamped my passport violently, making sure to plonk the imprint right in the middle of the only remaining fresh page.

As I walked into Nepal again, the usual feeling of dull trepidation I experienced at dusty border crossings was replaced with some kind of mental tag, as if I’d momentarily froze upon setting foot in a new country and been CAT-scanned by my own

brain. The better part of me felt pure with a clean slate ready to be filled with mountain memories, but he was still there deep in the recesses, almost inaudible, save for some homespun philosophy straight from the suburban West. One thing I remember hearing while loitering around my thoughts to while away the nights was “I need to smoke some brown just to get my head straight.” I’m not sure now if I heard that before or after I re-entered Nepal with a stamp in my passport, but it was definitely around that time. And on my first night walking towards Kathmandu, in between hitching rides with pissed truckers, me bailing only when a driver insisted on traversing hairpin bends with his knees controlling the steering wheel while he downed roxy, I saw my reflection in a mica-infested granite slab. As I checked myself in the stele inlaid with Indo-Aryan scenes of meditation and nature, I noticed wax dripping from candles on the window sill of a small shop still servicing passers-by. After that, my next memory was of Kathmandu.

You barely notice scaling the ridge at the top of the bowl that sweeps down to the medieval city of Kathmandu. I was just trundling along, attempting to convince myself that I was following the footsteps of some Silk Road trader and not barrelling into the capital of Nepal for a reptilian pit stop in which I could fuel myself with Western delights rarely seen on the subcontinent: pizza, Dutch beer and Swiss chocolate. For the first time in years, I felt a childish delight at nearing the end of a journey. I knew this would be the last walking I would do for a week or two. I’d be fucked if I was going to walk east all the way to Sikkim from the Kathmandu valley, along a pot-holed dusty road full of noisy truck stops and lowlanders creeping towards suburbia. My anticipation was heightened by the knowledge that I was only a few hours away from breaking my fast and lying flat on my back in a guesthouse surrounded by temples while chugging on premium hashish.

As I passed through the last small village before entering the valley, I noticed when glancing through house windows elderly men sitting in candlelit rooms. They were gazing into the flames, absorbed while reciting some tongue that didn’t sound Nepali. I put my ear right up to a window pane; the house’s occupant oblivious to me. I wondered if I’d stumbled upon the last fire worshippers of the Himalaya; more likely it was the vestige of some ritual associated with a holiday I was too ignorant to know about. I

wanted to walk into the city, but as dusk fell, I could see the illuminations beneath me. Villages were becoming more regular. Something had happened to this once hidden and magical city: urban sprawl. Not on the relentless scope seen in Western capitals, but it was undeniable. Beckoned by teenagers hanging out of the back window of a passing bus, I launched myself into a sprint, just managing to swing my frame into its always opened doorway. I stood on the steps to let technology eat up untold potential effort. It would have been a straight-up cheat in the mountains proper, but I was on holiday now. Yet I still couldn't take it all the way, and in a pointless nod to my bullshit Western core, I jumped off at Lalitpur in order to walk through the old town and across the river. I would arrive in Kathmandu the only way a searcher should: by foot.

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Down a side alley off Durbar Square, I darted into a small recess, unaware of whether it would open up into another laneway, provide passage through an internal courtyard into some hidden realm or leave me trapped at the mercy of the drug dealer who'd been pestering me for the past hour. I hadn't even given him as much as a "how much," but the bastard had seen it in my eyes; and now he was playing a game of attrition, hoping I would angrily agree to a deal. But tonight he was wrong. I was going to find what I wanted with feel. Every few minutes I could hear his melodic whisper carry through the alley behind me: "This is what you need when you're here to find your mind." But I was in a weary delirium—everything sounded like the first line of a chorus to me. I swung back into the quiet end of a busier thoroughfare eying the barely lit shop signs in search of a restaurant. And that's when I locked eyes with a class dealer. "Oh my friend... forgive me," he exulted. His tall frame hung with some marriage weight, but he had the presence of a man who was always nice because he'd nothing to prove.

"Hey," I replied, winking at him disarmingly.

"You are taking a trip to the mountains. Do you need a guide, my friend?"

"No thanks, boss. I like to walk alone."

"It's a lonely road alone in the highlands."

“It’s a lonely road in the lowlands too, boss.”

He smiled and nodded his head sideways. “Do you need something to keep you warm for your journey?”

“I hope you don’t mean a woman, boss.”

He shook his head. “No. You can go to the hotel nightclubs if you want to find a girl for sale: Tibetan, Chinese, Indian...”

“No Nepali?”

“It’s possible, but better to go to a village to find a nice girl.”

“For money... do you really think I’m that sort of man?”

“No, of course you are handsome, but I just...”

“I’m only messing with you. Just for the record, are you saying I don’t have to pay any baksheesh for a village girl?”

“You know my friend; you always have to pay some baksheesh.”

“And what about you. How much baksheesh do I have to pay you for the smokie you’re going to try to sell me?”

“Minimum amount my friend.” I laughed—he was reeling in a customer. “Come to my house, and try it. If you don’t like it, no buying. I have ganja fresh from the mountains.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to be rude...”

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“You’re high now, Luke.” There was a slight reverb in my ears as I traced my eyes across the plywood interior of the pizza parlour for the third time. The THC buzz was wearing thin already.

“Do you really want one of these pizzas?” I asked Biran, amazed that a man of such insight was going for this angle.

“You promised me.” His face looked doughy.

“I’m happy to buy you dinner, but this place doesn’t look good. Let’s go to some nice Nepali restaurant.”

“Fuck that. I eat Nepali food every day. My wife forbids pizza.”

“That’s a good wife you’ve got.”

“Yes. You need to get a wife, Luke. It’s no good for a man not to have a wife. It leads to bad things.”

“Like this sort of stuff.” I pointed to the far side of the eatery. Flaky Buddhism had transplanted itself to Kathmandu as suspiciously loud pujas were recited in between slices of pizza. I

watched the self-consumption and wondered why the eater hadn't tried to trace back from his hometown to a source.

"I can get you a kilo of fresh stuff within a couple of hours."

Biran was making short work of his Hawaiian.

"Where does it come from?"

"High mountains, crystal side."

"I think I'd prefer some good stuff to fresh stuff."

"I thought you liked pure," replied Biran, chewing happily.

"I do, but I need more than air."

"I'll find my friend now. Don't worry; he'll give you a good price." Biran looked around and shrugged while wiping his hands on a flimsy napkin, rolling it into a ball before dropping it by a rejected pizza crust. He walked over to the counter and retrieved a chunky phone from behind a standing clock and began to dial. After a couple of minutes of laughing and head shakes, he reeled off a list of numbers, the only part of the conversation I caught. Biran hung up and flung himself back onto his seat to finish his Coke. "Why do Westerners wear old clothes and carry expensive guitars with them?" He nodded towards a carefully scruffy group of Euros and exhaled despairingly.

"Maybe they are keepers of the troubadour spirit secretly passed down through the generations," I suggested.

"No, Luke. They are not, and you know it. Anyway, meet me here at eight o'clock please, and we will do some good business."

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I sat on the rooftop of the pizza parlour nursing a mint tea and trying to block out the steadily increasing volume from some Swiss climber intent on recounting every mountain he'd ever walked upon. When your mind is on other things, but you can't help overhearing a neighbouring rant, the resulting truncated sentences demand clarification. "Shitting all over... the mountain is not the same... why can't they go home?" I thought maybe it was some kind of pilgrimage. "And the pictures... they will never get it."

As the sentences began to merge into coherence, I was impressed by his syntax. "They are just there to scream in triumph. They want everyone to know. They cannot go anywhere without a

camera. Why can't they just enjoy the mountain?" I felt like I was slipping out of touch with what was going on with the main phalanx of tourists sweeping through the subcontinent. Maybe I needed to check back in. "You know... if they could have some permanent exhibition of everything they do just hanging in space for everyone to see, they would do it." He was beginning to lose me when I spotted Biran leading a helmeted man towards my table.

"Luke. This is Kalad." Biran sat down smiling and refused my offer of a drink.

"Kalad is a busy man; we can't wait."

"Okay," I replied smiling. Kalad proceeded to remove his helmet and with a lean forced his unhealthily sallow complexion onto me. He was sizing me up with the misplaced confidence of a mid-level gangster.

"You want a kilo," he asserted.

"Maybe, how much?"

"How much do you want to pay?"

"I'll have to see it first?"

"You don't trust me," he replied as if I'd wounded his honour.

"Of course I trust you. If I didn't trust you, I'd be asking to smoke it." He smiled and produced a block of deep brown hashish wrapped in a handkerchief.

"This is a kilo," he declared. "The usual price is three hundred dollars, but because Biran says you are good man, I will give to you for two fifty."

I looked at it and, protruding my lower lip, nodded as if taken aback. "Well, the local price is no more than one twenty. I'm going to give you one fifty because I like you and you came on time."

"That is not possible." He flexed as he responded. "I could sell this to a Japanese tourist for four hundred." Biran nodded, a look of genuine concern betraying his fear of losing his cut.

"I wouldn't be surprised if you could sell it to a Japanese tourist for seven hundred, but I won't be paying more than one fifty. I know what it's worth, and I know this is good business for you. If you want to fuck tourists, go out to Durbar Square and start pedalling tolas. Or you can make a quick sale to me, we can be all cool and I'll pass on the word that you're good to do business

with.” Biran and Kalan went into furious congress. I smiled intermittently as if I understood what was being said. It seemed Biran was being chastised for not producing a sacrificial lamb.

“Okay, but don’t tell anybody how much we gave it to you for.” Now, I knew I’d paid over the odds. I peeled one fifty from the two hundred inside my pocket and surreptitiously slipped it to Biran.

“Now,” continued Kalad, “do you want a girl?”

I collected my kilo and jammed it under my jacket. “What do you think I’m doing in these mountains?” They looked at each other, genuinely bewildered. “It’s fucking crazy down there... everyone trying to bang somebody. I’m up here trying to get some peace.”

“Life is war, my friend,” replied Kalad. I smiled, positioned the lump under my fleece and walked off into the wrong mountains.

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## ***CHAPTER EIGHTEEN***



Landell looked up at a wooden timetable, searching for one of those destinations that everyone should visit before leaving India. The station hall was teeming with people, most appearing to be in deep trance as they looked for direction. A throng by the ticket counter funnelled towards a solitary clerk in spiralling limitlessness. Squinting as beams of late afternoon sunlight percolated the station's damaged roof, Landell tried to make out the stops listed on the Rajasthan Express. There was no sign of Udaipur. Desperately, he racked his brain for another must-see destination, but nothing would come. If he could just land somewhere in the middle of that state, he wouldn't be too far from a place worth tagging. He shot a glance towards the ticket counter. There was no relenting. A weary feeling of nausea crept over Landell again, but he reminded himself that he hadn't booked out of his guesthouse and lugged his belongings to the station to turn back now. He decided the ticket clerk would understand "Next train to Rajasthan." Now, he only had to overcome the mammoth task of filling out the requisite form to the satisfaction of a seer-eyed clerk. Looking around feebly for help in the shape of station hustlers, their absence taunted him.

After a couple of minutes of loitering around the ticket counter, Landell found himself being pulled into the mangled queue. He shuffled forward tentatively as passengers flooded in from all angles. Each time he thought he'd made eye contact with the clerk and was about to get a question in, heads would turn as ticket stubs thrust forward into a tiny arc-shaped hatch. Listless, Landell veered away from the line and propped himself up against a wall. Unable to summon up the frustration necessary to lambast the labyrinthine challenge of buying a train ticket in India, he settled on examining the endless stream of passengers occupying the station hall: hawkers, the homeless

and people bedding down until their trains arrived. It was wondrous and way too much to get a handle on. As the action began to blur, Landell bent towards beaten. Blinking himself back into focus, a weary-eyed, undefeated railway clerk was staring at him with depressed brotherly affection. "Where are you going?"

"Rajasthan," replied Landell before lapsing into an incoherent rider.

"Do you have a ticket?"

"No."

"When do you want to go?"

"As soon as possible."

The clerk reached underneath an inked sign dangling from a wall and produced an unearthly tome that Landell guessed was some kind of timetable skeleton. "The Jaipur Mail Express is coming presently. Hand me one of those pieces of paper and I'll complete it for you." Landell spotted a few dog-eared dockets spread on the counter. He feebly handed one over. "Name. Country. Occupation. Passport number."

Landell reeled them all off in a daze, awkwardly proffering a hundred-rupee note as he accepted the completed docket. The man shook his head definitively.

"Thank you." Landell looked in his eyes and bowed his head. "Do you know which platform?"

"Check the board on Platform Number One, and ask a ticket inspector. It could change at any time."

"Any idea when the train is due?"

"In twenty minutes. If it arrives within four hours, you should be happy."

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"So even lying on a beach can be a deep spiritual experience." Landell nodded while closing his eyes, trying to ram home that he was ready for sleep. But when a man wants to speak, even the promise of experiencing truth is not enough to

shut him up. "Think about it." Landell nodded wearily while trying to gauge how long his Italian cabin mate had been working on his tan for. "If you just focus on the backs of your eyelids for a few minutes while the sun's rays pour down on you, you are living in the now. Just feel the glow, and all your plans and thoughts will disappear. No, there is another word, dis..."

"Dissipate," responded Landell, grumpily looking down on the Italian's superior aesthetic. The train shuddered to a halt.

"Oh, we must be at a station. I need to experience it." Landell turned in his bunk to face the wall, looking forward to the early morning, when he might capture snapshots of rural work scenes. Within a few seconds, the grey blue of the upholstery began to infiltrate behind his eyeballs, but before he could slip away a preliminary jolt of the train made him flinch. Pressing his nose up to the plain surface, with his eyes a few centimetres from the two oversized screws holding up the bunk, he began to mutter. "Fuck him. If he were as good as everyone claims, he'd be dead."

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Exhaustion had induced Landell into a stream of fitful naps throughout the night. By the time hollering train station vendors and aggressive passengers on pre-emptive bathroom breaks had forced him to wake up proper, it was already almost eight o'clock. Hanging his head down from his upper bunk, he could see just about see out of the top section of the train window. There was still a morning coolness in the air left over from the desert night. Everything appeared upside down, but there was no mistaking the change in the landscape. Gone were the lush greens of tropical Kerala, replaced by the arid orange of a desert zone with flashes of pink marble protruding from the unlikeliest of places. Men with wizened faces wore white turbans; women with Rajput noses strutted confidently, whether overweight with shopping bags or ripped with loads on their heads signifying a day of physical labour. Yellows, greens and

blues dazzled with the rising sun. Even the rural stations flashing by hinted at the immeasurable wealth of those who knew how to assure their genetic heritage. Landell closed his eyes, tightened them and opened them again, trusting he would once more see things as he'd done up until that morning. The train was slowing taxiing towards a junction. He looked around with a puzzled face and was immediately acknowledged by a neat man with the appearance of efficiency. "Ajmer is coming," the Indian stated.

"That's not me yet then," replied Landell, smiling awkwardly.

"Where are you going, sir?"

"Pushkar... I hope."

"It is best to get down Ajmer side then."

"But my ticket says Pushkar."

"Perhaps sir, but this train shall not be frequenting Pushkar. You can change at Ajmer. There are many trains there for Pushkar."

"Oh, ok. Thanks."

Landell dropped back into his seat and studied his ticket once more before accepting a new reality. He looked towards the tracks outside, which were now multiplying. Old rusted carriages lay dormant on strips of grass and dead-end stretches of track. Bedraggled workers limped between trains before spryly hopping aboard. As he moved his eyes from the outside aesthetic back to the inside of the train, a very European face nodded and invited itself to sit beside a fellow tourist. "Hello. Are you going to Pushkar?"

"Yes."

"Ah, I knew you were a searcher." Landell moved his mouth.

"I am going too, but it's not like it used to be."

"Really."

"Ah, it's your first time." Landell was not given an opportunity to respond as the sharp French accent filled all the

gaps. "Yes... not so good anymore, but there are still one or two places if you know where to look."

"I'm only going for a couple of days," replied Landell.

"That's what everybody says, but then the magic takes hold. Of course, the elite smell the money now, so they are trying to control things. You know... control those in the vanguard, the true searchers. They are always quick to move in on any new things, hungry for money and coming with some bullshit moral stance on the art and the language of the true searchers. But we are the artists who need no patrons. And that scares them."

"Well, I wouldn't know," replied Landell.

"That's okay my friend. You can come with me. I will get you set up in Pushkar."

"That's very kind of you, but I've got to do something in Ajmer first."

"Oh, I see." The Frenchman leapt up and continued to the next carriage. When a few minutes later Landell went to the toilet in an optimistic attempt to clean his hands, he saw his inquisitor crouched down, earnestly gesturing to two blonde-haired European women in their early twenties.

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Down dusty lanes and broken brick streets leading towards the main marketplace of Pushkar, a steady stream of tourists walked in various guises: crimson robed novices, pan-believers with encrusted hair and self-anointed Brahmin priests carrying tridents. Landell kept on searching, torn between the rumour-ridden cool of the designated travellers' lodge and the airily conservative expanse of a guesthouse with well-kept gardens. As the gate to the latter swung open with the breeze, he took it as an invitation.

Seated outside on a white wrought-iron chair was a sturdy Indian man with a thick silver thatch of hair on his sun-baked head, shuffling papers around a bamboo table before flexing his

right arm, pen in hand, and launching into a furious scribble. An elegantly tattooed Southern European couple with identical ruby nose piercings skipped by Landell as he approached the old man. "Good afternoon. Would you have a room available?"

The man cocked his head in blank contemplation before turning with a nasal exhalation. He looked at Landell with a weird blend of curiosity and dismissiveness. "What is your occupation, sir?"

"I'm a writer." Landell looked above the man's head as he replied.

"Excellent. We will make room for you. I myself am a writer. Not a professional like you of course. But I'm working on my memoirs." Landell nodded wearily. "Come come," the man continued. "You can leave your bag inside. I will have my son's room made up for you. We can sit outside and discuss the finer points of writing. Would you like some fresh lime juice?"

"Err yes. Thank you."

"Then it's settled. Please sit down. How may I call you?"

"Landell."

"Hmm... funny name. Anyway, you may call me Singh. That's what all my friends call me. My full name is a real mouthful. Excellent... let's talk about culture." Landell wearily pulled a chair around so his face would be away from the Sun's glare. "So Mister Landell, my auspicious guest. Are all cultures ultimately blocking devices?" Landell lurched for the glass of lime juice positioned in front of him, holding it up to his mouth without taking a sip. "Well Mister Landell, you are a writer. You must know."

"I've never really thought about it in those terms."

"I am thinking of a thing that a friend of mine once said. I ignored it for many years, but it never completely left my memory." Singh's nose twitched as he sipped his lime juice. "He said to me that all cultures are blocks."

"Maybe," replied Landell, trying not to go down a path that would require too much thought to navigate back from.

“But that would suggest that those cultures having not been much influenced retain more original quality.”

“Or that those cultures that haven’t influenced others do,” replied Landell.

“Ahh... excellent my friend. But it is so hard to know. How can one measure pervasiveness? Also, my friend might have been applying the same judgement to all cultures.” A waifish young man emerged from around the back of the house and reported something to Singh, who rapidly rose from his seat, promising to continue the conversation with Landell later that night—the “deconstruction of India” was on his mind.

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“So why then does India compare so nicely alongside supposedly richer choices?”

The question was barely audible to Landell as he peered from behind a laminated menu. A lithe Australian was sprawled over an adjacent plastic chair, his head tilted back towards trellised shrubbery, considering the puzzle presented to him by a broad Lancashire accent, the questioner obscured by a sandalwood pillar holding up the open-air restaurant. Landell felt triggered, the social reluctance to offer an answer from afar competing against the amnesty all tourists in India seemed to have to spout anything that passes through their cognition. As he motioned to a waiter preening his moustache while loitering between customers, an American voice spoke up. “Because the so-called first world nations are moving further and further away from what people need.”

“Ah, you may be right,” replied the Lancashire man, turning to reveal a shaven head and tight features. “But you’re not telling me India is giving its people what they need, are you? Most of them are at death’s bloody door.”

“But they are happy.”

“What makes you think that?” drawled the Australian, his head still drooped backwards towards the plant life. “It’s only

when they meet us tourists that they turn those grimaces into smiles. They aren't grins you're witnessing; that's desperation, mate."

"No, I think you're missing the point."

The Australian and the Englishman laughed in unison. Awkwardness soon took precedence, with the unspoken pacifist undertone of all interactions between tourists assumed to be in effect. Landell felt a wavering attraction to the men whose words had created the atmosphere. Two banana pancakes later, he had yet to speak. The optimistic American had tried to make eye contact a few times, but his target had remained steadfast. When the other two called for their bills, Landell followed suit, gauging that he would be able to catch up with the pair somewhere out on the road, but by the time he stepped onto the dirt trail, they were out of sight. Resigned, he loped back to his guesthouse without seeing anyone. The occasional lilting tone of a foreigner trailed him through the night air. As he approached his lodgings he was left only with an unlikely mixture of relief and rejection.

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"Good morning, Mr. Landell. I was hoping we could take breakfast together." Landell smiled uneasily and sat at a small table adjacent to Singh. "I have been spending the entire morning thinking of what we talked about yesterday, or rather an extension of our conversation. I think the simplest way to say what I'm feeling is why the draw towards religion, philosophy or cultural practices of any kind if they are ultimately blockages?"

"That's a big question for first thing in the morning," replied Landell, smiling.

"Oh, it is almost lunchtime my friend. I am sure a writer like you knows the answers to these questions. Even if you do not consider them explicitly, they are interwoven with your words, slipping between the lines like oil through an engine. Don't be modest, my friend."



“Well they may retain something original—some basis or lessons.”

“Hmm...” Singh furrowed his brow. “Maybe you are on to something, but I fear the core values or lessons of the great philosophies have been all but lost.”

“Maybe it’s in the spirit,” suggested Landell.

“I am not liking that word, but I think you may have located something.”

“Well, however lost or diluted they are now, I think there are some intrinsic qualities of the great thinkers that appeal to people still.” Landell shuffled and reached for a handwritten breakfast menu sitting on his table.

“It’s the memory,” declared Singh. “It’s the faintest memory still contained within these religions that holds sway over the people. That smallest of small purities is still there somewhere, even if only in some wisp of memory.” Singh smiled broadly, his whiskers lifting.

“Is it small and intact or diluting away?”

“That is a good question my friend. Yes, a very good question. But even if it dilutes away, there will still be a memory within, and that memory is enough to cure.”

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Landell returned to the same restaurant as he’d eaten at the night before, partly out of a need for sanctuary and somewhat out of his weakening hope to commit socially. With only one table occupied he felt assured, but before he could secure a menu, the first hints of guru speak were finding him. “There are many paths to God,” asserted a bearded speaker. Landell felt the overwhelming urge to stand up and leave, but there was still something in him that wanted to see how the speech would play out. He looked over his shoulder to see a perfectly symmetrical couple with superb tans nodding as they kneaded wooden necklaces in tandem. “But the Western path has taken a bad turn,” continued the speaker. “Yes, but many of

you are coming here to India to be reunited with the true path. And this is a necessary thing.” Briefly holding his fingertips together in a bundle, he let them release like nebula spreading reality into their universe.

Landell looked under his armpit and saw two more people joining the group. The rising thrall was about to send him reeling out onto the street when the squashed northern tones of Lancashire spread through the air. “Watch him. He’s a bullshitter. He’ll smoke your gear and then try to hit you up for cash at the end of the night.”

“Ah, my friend.” The guru rose to greet a potential spanner. “Join us.”

“You must be bloody joking... to listen to that ‘there are many ways to God’ speech.” The Lancashire man leaned over the table and focused on the four callow listeners. “You should get yourselves over to that Moon Star café. The guru there is much fucking better. He’s not peddling any of this East-West, classical-romantic rubbish. He’s talking about the synthesis, where it all blends and how to get there. It’s actually pretty good stuff. Mind you, he’ll still smoke your gear and hit you up for baksheesh at the end of the night. But at least he earns it, not like this chancer.” With that, the Lancashire man swept through the restaurant, spoke some thick Hindi to the proprietor and signalled to Landell on his way out. All of his business was done within thirty seconds. Landell nodded and ordered a banana pancake.

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Waving off a kerb-crawling auto-rickshaw driver, Landell cut across a glass strewn area of tarmac peppered with tufts of determined grass. In the distance, he could see the bus station; in the foreground was a sprinkling of disinterested camels chomping on trash along a desolate stretch of turf designated for a new marketplace. Frames of stalls were awaiting the next invasion of commerce. He moved in an arc, a respectful distance

from the camels, which from time to time shot him a knowing glance as they ruminated on their feed.

There was still no sign of the bus. Singh had assured him that it would be waiting by ten o'clock and tickets could only be bought on board. Landell wearily braced himself for the sudden appearance of a baying crowd that would secure every seat before he could figure out if it was his bus or not. He scoped his surroundings on the edge of town—there was no sign of life. He expected at least a few early birds, but there was nobody. It felt like an ambush. Landell stood still.

“Are you meditating, friend?” For the first time in many years Landell was being gently pushed by one of those moments of true clarity. Before his frontal cortex could register what was happening, he was shunted out of it, with his natural feel left hanging for something he’d no idea how to access. “Good for you, friend.” Landell looked up and saw a lean but open-faced Indian. His manner was unaffected and his eyes hard to pin down. “Everybody should meditate in one form or another. I’ve been bad about it myself recently. It was good to see you doing it here in an open space.”

“I was just looking for a bus,” replied Landell.

“Aren’t we all? But just as we are custodians of the Earth, so are we custodians of our bodies. And meditation can at least keep us in the right range to receive moments of realization in between visible dimensions.”

“You’re English is good. Did you live somewhere in England?”

“No, I just like thinking in English.”

“Maybe you’re right about meditation.”

“I don’t know, but there’s something to it,” replied the local while pushing his long black hair away from his face and smiling ruefully. “Otherwise, we are just trying to access moments randomly... even if there seems to be the same likelihood of having these moments whether we meditate or not.” A horn sounded. It lasted for a few seconds, rising and dipping in a jingle. Landell turned and saw five or six locals

scurrying towards a bus, most overburdened with a selection of household appliances and sheets of plywood, and broke into an awkward trot as his spirits rose at the prospect of securing a seat for his journey to Jaipur.

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## **CHAPTER NINETEEN**



It only took five days of traversing a path in the mountains until I admitted to myself I was lost. My fantasy of walking east through the Nepalese highlands straight into Sikkim was fading with the people I met - most shook their heads like a child was dying when I informed them of my plans. “Kathmandu that way,” was the usual parting gesture. I knew something was wrong. It wasn’t just the fact that I only had the Sun to guide me; there was something gnawing at my memory banks. When I spotted a river below after another day of swirling around mountainsides wondering which side the Sun was going to set on, I realized what it was. I’d been so magnetized by my mission of going back to source in the deep mountains that I had forgotten the loose obligation I felt to visit Varanasi. I only fleetingly considered it a sign of submission that I felt like scooting down to the plains straight away. The time felt right in a way that the time had only felt right a few times before.

As I looked for the Sun, it caught me in the golden swirls nestling around a stupa one hundred feet below. Moving towards it, I noticed a river bend coming into view, the sunbeams eliding on its surface. But the trail took me away again, and it was another hour before a roadhead came into view. I was in what a retired shepherd, the only sign of life, informed me was Phaparbari; and if I walked down the road for a mere forty clicks I would get to the town of Hetauda. From there, I could catch a bus to the border and on to Varanasi. He made it sound so easy, even suggesting I might be able to hitch a lift some of the way. Smiling, he returned to inspecting the grass around the area where the road fizzled out into a mud trail. He gave me more information in one minute than I’d received in weeks, and I thanked him many times over the next twenty hours as I made it across the border, legitimizing my visas in the process, and hopped, skipped and transferred my way through broken down busses to the ancient city.

The final ride into Varanasi as midnight approached held that beautiful fusion of menace and peaceful darkness that only rolling into cities can give. The street lights interspersed between

settlements brought vistas of suburban night life like blinds flickering open and shut. From my perch of half a seat and the edge of a hessian bag load of vegetables, I watched out of the corner of my eye as friendly natives surreptitiously played with the zips on my resting backpack. After a few moments, I considered the worthless shit in the outside pockets of my bag and stopped monitoring their zip-meddling.

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“It’s a ten-rupee fare and I’m going to give you fifteen. You can take it or stay here and wait another four hours for the next bus to roll in. It’s midnight.”

“Twenty rupees my friend. It’s late.”

“Well, then there’ll be less traffic on the road. It’ll make it easier for you.”

“Acha.” He stood on one pedal theatrically before pushing off into a steady rhythm. I refused to feel bad for giving someone fifty per cent more than they would get from a local. But as he began to pedal, the difference between a cycle rickshaw and an auto-rickshaw hit home. I resolved to give him the twenty he’d asked for just as he turned with a broad grin on his face and whispered ‘Mannikaran ghat’ three times. He was happy in his work, and I was hopped up absorbing the occasional street-side kerosene lamp casting sodium shadows on the fractured alleyways of Varanasi. “Benares is a very old city, my friend,” he declared while resting on a pedal.

“Hmmmmm.”

“Is it your first time, brother?”

“Hmmmmm.” He fired more questions at me in a very genuine manner, and I hummed at all of them—not out of rudeness but more in unison with the energy that was coursing through me. There were layers upon layers, and I couldn’t even conceptualize that I was a pure recipient before another wave enveloped me.

I palmed a lucky red twenty note into his hand and winked. He smiled broadly and jerked his head in approval. Bouncing away while mapping memories of Varanasi’s alleyways, I debated whether to go to the Yellow House, one of the oldest lodges for tourists in India. The proprietor was a quiet man, silent with knowledge. He

seemed to have made the blueprint for how a cheap travellers' lodge should be operated. It was faultless. But somehow through a chain of pulls while escaping from threatening eyes lurking in unlikely places but offering no contraband, I found myself down a dark olive passageway that led into a guesthouse for Indians only. In the dead of night, I was ushered to the second floor, stepping over sleeping workers on the way and into a perfectly still, crimson shaded room of darkness. I was in the heart of Varanasi.

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I had set my mind, clear from weeks of breathing nothing but Himalayan air, to dissolving by the ghats as the remnants of life burned before me. But I wasn't ten metres out of the guesthouse when I'd been propositioned twice by drug dealers masquerading as silk sellers, their undertone whispers pitched perfectly as I flitted by their shop fronts. I logged the spots and traced my steps as I loped around the back alleys of old Varanasi. The air was cramped with a fugue seeping in between the buildings from the Ganges, just a stone's throw away but impossible to spy through the network of decrepit structures. It was hard to guess how old they were, but even the most strident sceptic would be hard pressed to deny the antiquity of the atmosphere. This was the real deal. What had started out as a plan to do a quick lap of the alleyways to pick up some provisions quickly turned into a labyrinthine jaunt, which only began to map out in my head when the same bearded fruit seller greeted me for the third time. "What is sir looking for?" he wailed after me.

I already felt like I'd logged a morning's worth of exploration after twenty minutes of maze tripping. On what I'd decided would be my final lap, I gave in to decorum and responded with a '*kitne*' each time somebody offered me hashish. The problem was that as soon as I asked how much, they were already way down their list of other substances I might want: ice, brown, white, bhang. As half of my face looked at a minute shop serving as a newsagents while I asked for water and papers, the other half was negotiating in the adjacent stall for pharmaceutical cocaine straight from the labs of Pakistan. I had no intention of inserting such a rogue substance up my nose, but I needed to know the price I could haggle the bright-

eyed seller down to—it's not easy gauging the precise moment to give up when you don't want what you're bargaining for. Shaking my head in mock despair, I went on my way, bottled water and green Rizlas in hand. I had a fair idea of the going rate; it was now just a question of quality. Smiling, I realized it would probably come down to buying from that first merchant lying in wait for me when I'd left the guesthouse earlier. An unlikely gratitude swept over me that he'd waited so patiently having spotted a potential mark. But that business would not happen before I got a chance to bluff some local out of the moral highground when he approached me slightly too aggressively with a pitch. "Yes sir, yes yes." Interesting opening. "I promise you, you will be content."

"Fuck off," I replied.

"Why you speaking in that way to me?" He actually had the gall to physically flex, showing me his back was up.

"Because I have come here to experience the wonder of your culture and you disrespect me with this bullshit, trying to sell me illegal substances... you should be ashamed."

"What does legal mean, my friend. This is Varanasi. Things are different here. Just try one time. You will be happy."

"I only smoke brown," I declared.

"It's possible my friend." His drooping eyes turned from aggression to those of a fellow cult member. "Come, my friend." I smiled and shook my head as the energy brimming all about me refused to die with the burning bodies. All I could think about was that culture is the enemy. Like a mantra cutting through the night air, those words kept slowly churning around my mind. They seemed to counter everything that was around me: the words of tourists, liberals and even elitist conservatives back home were all about culture; inserting it into your life, competing to show your knowledge of it, scrabbling to witness it. But as I glided through the cramped alleyways, I was sure it was the enemy, so sure I didn't feel a need to construct ramparts for an argument that nobody was going to support me on. And yet, Varanasi was a place deep with culture, both living and dying. Just nipping out to the newsagents was an experience richer with culture than most people would feel in a lifetime. It was hanging in a burning mist over the river. It was in the business transactions constantly happening by the riverbanks. It was in the attempts of that first person to offer me drugs; he'd



probably been waiting for me all morning while trying to come up with the right cultural pitch.

As I turned back to the stretch of alley leading to my guesthouse, he popped his head out of his wooden-framed booth once again and ushered me in. I barely registered his earnest spiel about the quality of his wares as he spread some decoy jewellery in front of me. Anyway, I'd already made my mind up to let him eke out ten per cent more than I would usually permit. He kept on talking while I shook my head wearily. I was still busy trying to lock onto the exact words to illustrate how it was the removal, or jumping over, of cultures that was necessary if you really wanted to know what the fuck was going on. Struggling with the answer, I wasn't sure if it was the old one step backwards to leap three forward or whether it was entirely doing away with any process of attainment. But culture was the enemy, I'd decided. It was a myriad of distractions and deflections from the route to underlying reality. But a boatload of clues to that route was contained within it. Were they just other forms of egotistical pandering? I considered these possibilities for the next few hours as I lay down on my bed and began to work through the flaky but potent ounce I'd procured from my watcher. The layers of instrumentation in my ears fused happily with the strata of the hashish and the spin-off questions from the continuous drumming of those words in my mind.

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On the way out of my room the following morning after putting a twelve-hour power sleep in the books, I was feebly waylaid by a waifish Dane who kept muttering something about dysentery while he sipped on a can of cola. I asked him if he needed anything, and he directed me to a pizza restaurant that served doormats laced with cheap tomato sauce and charged silly money for the privilege of dropping one awkwardly in front of you. I sat there while the hook-up the Dane had told me about looked on voraciously. Fixed in his forced casual manner, he didn't know he was doing me a favour by cadging the lion's share of the pizza. "For you, best price my friend."

"Listen, man. I'm just doing a favour for my Danish friend. You know who I'm talking about, don't you?" He nodded without

breaking his gluttony. “He told me he paid you five hundred for a bag, which is a complete rip-off. I’ll give you eight hundred for two, which is also a rip-off, but I don’t like being seen in a place like this.”

“Why, my friend? It is cool here.”

“No, it’s not. It’s exactly the type of place the police will be looking for dippy tourists. Does the owner pay off the cops? Do you?” He looked sheepishly towards the pizza and began to prod the last remaining slice with his little finger. His tweed jacket looked preposterous with his lank hair and unshaven face all over it.

“Give me one thousand, and I’ll give you two big bags.” The lines around his eyes tightened as he made his offer.

“I’ll give you eight for two big bags. Anyway, you’ve eaten almost two hundred’s worth of pizza. Go on; get that last slice into you.” As he greedily chomped on it, he reminded me that I was supposed to raise my offer a little bit. “I don’t have time to dick around. It’s probably garbage anyway.”

“This is the best one in Varanasi,” he hissed with the tremor of a man whose family business of generations had been insulted. He made a believer out of me, but it was all relative. There was no decent weed around these parts. With some veiled threat of how he’d never give me such an offer again and was only doing so because the nice Danish man was sick, he produced two disparate baggies. I scooped them up and winked as I left.

Back at the guesthouse, I asked the Dane if it was any good. “Weirdly nice, in an electric way... I don’t want to know how they’re getting it,” he added. This intrigued me enough to insist he didn’t pay me anything so long as I took the bigger bag. After a few minutes of being upright on his feet he weakened. “Keep your money, mate. Drink electrolytes and if you need any more, let me know.” I wanted to feel electric as I was rowed down the Ganges at dusk with bodies burning and mourners submerging themselves in the cleansing waters. And I did, laughing at the hygiene-obsessed tourists who assumed their shower water was coming from a magical tank reserved for Westerners. The bottle green buds carried me right through any cultural overtones and directly to the ceremony of the ages. As I laid my head on the edge of the boat to stare sideways back to the burning ghats, a dead cow with its four legs bolt upright floated by me, framing the pyres as it went.

“Why are you so angry? It’s business my friend. You need to grow up.” I watched the hustler from the pizza parlour fob off an irate tourist with increasing menace, unimpressed with the rising anger of the wan Westerner. The threats of a smackhead neck deep in his addiction presented no danger to a Varanasi street hustler, even one who looked fevered up constantly from his sugar addiction to fake white and chemical-laden hooch. I squashed a smile as he looped back into an alley without spotting me and headed to the ghat on the far side of Mannikaran in a quest for some peace as I contemplated how long I was going to stay in the sacred city.

I’d only just plonked my ass on an upper step, well away from the hawking oarsmen, when a local with premature lines constricting his face sidled up to me and in a voice of gravelly incision asked if I had a light. I would’ve thought it were a hustle only for the calmness of his motions. He lit up and began to draw slowly, smoking with his eyes. A pair of lanky Europeans with long blonde locks appeared further down the steps and began taking studied photographs of the passing river traffic. As I drifted, struggling to arrive at the conclusions I’d gone there to find, the local spoke to me without turning his gaze from some spot on the ground a few steps below. “More tourists with their ideas of culture instead of getting into it.” I guffawed and felt like a fool. “For a couple of dollars, they could drift down the Mother Ganga surrounded by the greatest truths available, but instead they won’t in case a boatman cheats them. Meanwhile, they will happily spend a small fortune on film.”

“Westerners like looking at cultures,” I responded.

“That’s a waste of time. It’s living in the truth that is important, whatever that truth may prove to be. In fact, culture is your enemy.” He stubbed his cigarette on the edge of a step and stood up.

I wasn’t ready to accept this type of synchronicity. “How long have you known that for?”

“I’ve been thinking of it for a few years.”

“You’re way ahead of me then. I just realized it today.” He waved his head and walked away. As he disappeared around the corner of a temple, I peered back down the steps towards the spot he’d been locked on. I stayed like that for at least thirty minutes. Before I was ready to stand up, I felt a gentle hand on my forearm.

“Hello Luke.” I had that delayed moment of recognition without emotion followed by the sudden thump of my way being interrupted. I smiled and looked up. Her tan had become slightly deeper with the desert; her eyes were glistening.

“Amanda.”

“How have you been, Luke? I thought you were going deep into the mountains, never to return to the tourist trail.” She sat down beside me, and I pulled a blunt out of my shirt pocket and handed it to her.

“Well I did, but I felt a weird pull to swing by here for a few days before finishing the job. Anyway, some places on the tourist trail still have to be investigated.”

“Just a few days?” Amanda drew deeply on the tip.

“Yeah, I’ve already cut through over half of Nepal; I’m going to head back up in a couple of days.”

“Tell me about Nepal.” Her tone was somewhere between affection and regret.

“Oh, you know. One mountain just reflects another. Tell me everything you’ve been up to.”

“Well, it all went off as soon as you left Parvati.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. Dark sects abducting local village girls, although I was told by some social worker from Switzerland that it was Mumbai pimps who took them.”

“Did you head to Dharamsala?”

“Yeah. That was lots of fun—a real drama. More soul traders than you could imagine.”

I stood up to shake the numbness out of my ass. “Pass me back that blunt and break down the drama for me. I need to feel good about myself.”

“Well you know there’s Dharamsala, which is just a big mess of a city, and then the place where the tourists stay, right?”

“You mean McLeod Noganj?”

“Yeah, right. Well, the latest scandal was some American guy who was cutting off tourists at the pass, just before they rolled into Dharamsala. He was giving them all they could take in about the Dalai Lama and the corruption that had crept into his palace or whatever it’s called. Of course, the Dalai Lama was getting a free pass from tourists, but with all the chatter around town about money and the crass commercialism clinging onto the whole scene, I suppose people were open to a story. And this American dude gave it to them.”

“What did he do wrong? Sounds like another enterprising godseller to me.”

Amanda smiled and edged my hand away from where it was massaging my shoulder and began to knead it. “He was spiriting them to the home of the dark lamas; some abandoned village on the far side of the mountain from McLeod Ganj. Apparently, he was lacing their food with hash and belladonna before wheeling in one of the lamas to hold court. One night he fucked up though and dressed up himself, trusting the congregation were so mashed on drugs they’d be unable to notice. Some woman from Iceland was fasting and rumbled the whole thing. Of course, she was thrown out pronto, accused of being a journalist.”

“Proper fucking order,” I interjected.

“Anyway. That’s about it. Things began to disintegrate, but the rumour goes that he’s just moved operations to another dead village. And get this; the main man himself swings by for some spiritual top-up once a month. Who knows? It could be just people pissed off because they missed the action. But it sounds a bit cultish, don’t you think?”

“As much as any other religion I suppose.” I drew deeply. “Sounds like Himachal is being carved up.”

“I don’t think so. But around the tourist areas is turning into a real scramble.”

“It’s a shame when religion gets in the way of banana pancakes. That’s when you know a place is getting too touristy.” I motioned to Amanda with my head that I was taking off. “I’m going back to the guesthouse for a real smoke. Interested?”

“I was going to wait here for the sunset,” she replied, smiling peaceably.

“It’s forty-five minutes away. I’ll be returning for that. Come on.” She followed me closely.

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As the Sun dropped behind the ghat-side buildings, we skirted past shoppers like panicked housewives in a Christmas stampede. Down perpendicular alleys, shards of sunlight blended with candlelight to throw elongated mauve shadows around my ankles. “Gamble,” I exclaimed as I pulled Amanda with me into an alleyway I hadn’t yet gone down. We reached a titillating dead end. Past a broken door frame and a blockage of hanging laundry, an out appeared to lead to the temple walls—to which side was unclear. After five seconds of finessing, the improvised clothes racks began to veer. I bludgeoned my way with Amanda scrambling over my back, and some ridiculous flow we intersected with kept everything standing as we got through. Before us lay a narrow opening into a minor ghat; there wasn’t a soul to be seen. The horizon was lit up by deep coral blues overlaid with a blood red strata and a rapidly descending purplish grey melange. In silence, we walked to the bottom of the steps and looked out onto the boats congregating at a burning ghat around a slight bend in the river. Gradually, the sounds of three different drums slowly built into a rhythmic accompaniment to the pyre’s activity, which was just out of sight. Within seconds, wafts of thick incense blew our way, barely masking the aromatic smell of immolating flesh. From below, the thick creamy lavender smell of Malana hashish filled our nostrils. I passed a lit chillum to Amanda and she pulled on it four or five times before passing it back to me. I kept flitting between being nailed to a guesthouse bed in Parvati during a four-day stretch of power smoking and the riverside chanting, a joyous tinge enveloping the mournful waves that had started the ceremony.

With a second chillum burned through, I turned to Amanda and raised my eyebrows. She motioned me to sit down as she corrected her footing on the lower steps. “You went to Shaivist, right?” she asked as I pawed my shirt pocket to locate the half a tola I thought I’d brought with me.

“Yeah. Just for a few hours. It was a bit much. Why do you ask?”

"I stayed there for a couple of days. All the tourists did was smoke and watch movies."

"Nothing wrong with that," I replied.

"I mean that's all they did. It was a major breakthrough for them to have a biryani to sustain themselves. There was a similar vibe outside Dharamsala too. "

"What is that thing?"

"What do you mean?" Amanda asked as we began to walk back up the steps.

"Those patches of supposed cool where the deluded just bask their receptors all day, every day. It seems appealing, but within a few days, there's something very depressing about it. You're the psychologist: Share your knowledge, please."

"I'm not sure. But I think it's the same thing people are doing back home, eating snacks and watching TV or whatever it is. Or sunbathing maybe."

"Worshipping the Sun god: That's beautiful," I responded.

"Mmm... bad example. When are you going back up to the mountains?"

"In a day or two I suppose."

"Stay with me until you go." I winked.

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Some seriously sick part of me decided to scope the so-called modern section of Varanasi the following morning. Only a few blocks from the riverside, I was almost in the same head space as I'd experienced in Delhi. I was considering looping back for a smoke and tackling my errands later in the day when I heard two tourists debating a newspaper seller over the Indian prime minister holding a meeting with the Big Man in the hills. As I turned to cop their faces, at my ankles a welder working on a sheet of metal smiled broadly and signalled a Shivaite greeting with his right hand angled to his forehead. "That's the lama man gone too," he whispered. "Business to business is no good."

"You know," I said, smiling broadly at his brotherly confidence.

"Are you here to escape the Western game, brother?" he asked. I'd readily accepted that street welders were every bit as

intelligent as and usually a lot cooler than gurus, but the clip of this guy's English beggared belief.

"Not exactly brother," I replied.

"Trying to escape the Indian game now, brother?" he continued, his head askance.

"No brother. I'm working on an exit strategy from the entire game." He laughed and shook his head once with ceremonious acknowledgement before bailing into his sheet of metal again.

I was being pulled back to the ghats, the source of the area, but felt an obligation to follow up on some information I'd heard about a grassy area adjacent to a street of temples where priests had dispensed information to searchers more than two thousand years before. Mulling over my next move, I ducked into a side road to avoid the Sun's midday rays. By the time my pupils had blinked out the sunspots and dispersed the blue green hexagons, I found myself surrounded by day trippers, both domestic and imported, who were yapping earnestly while going between shops laden with tantric statuettes, ready to furnish grasping homes. I blanched at their nonchalance as they attempted to seep the source from the outside in. Shaking my head, almost trancelike, I'd reached the end of the road and come out at the river.

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I kept a healthy distance from the temples as I ambled around a field of lost lessons. At first, I thought I was searching for a spot to blaze in, but after twenty minutes I realized it was something else I was looking for, or looking to avoid. The temples in the distance were set out in orderly rows, only discernible from one another by how much money had been pumped into each order's structure. The smaller ones looked on in supine deliverance, an awkward joyousness framing their carefully delineated grounds. I was wobbling, moving aimlessly in some wild assumption that as much knowledge had been passed around where I was stepping as had somehow percolated the philosophies of the monks responsible for monetizing the way in temple form. But I was guessing: I might as well have been walking anywhere within a few miles of where I was. Who's to know where those ancient searchers pitched up to consider the underlying reality of what they were living through? I



briefly considered that the pilgrims to the various temples covering the gamut of Buddhist schools and each nation's take on the message were paying some kind of pure homage to the source. But it was hard to swallow. It felt wrong, and the further I tried to navigate back towards the origin, the more phony it seemed.

As soon as I'd found a flat patch of dry grass to lie down on, a man came towards me from the direction of the temples. It seemed impossible that he was on his way to somewhere: I looked behind and all I could see was the bend of a dry riverbed and a rubbish dump in the distance. His hands held tight to the handlebars of the bike he was wheeling. And his grin grew as he noticed that my eyes were locked onto his. I nodded and looked away when he got to within a few feet; I suppose I felt aggrieved that even here I couldn't conserve some isolation. He looked straight through me and dropped his bike onto the ground, its back wheel almost catching my outstretched leg. "Oh, I'm sorry brother," he began. Smiling, I laid back, eyes facing the afternoon sky. White cumulus clouds were gathering in an unlikely manner, even though I possessed zero knowledge of the local weather, or clouds for that matter. "You are visiting the temples." It sounded more like an accusation than an inquiry.

"No. This is my rest day. No business today." He fidgeted with the scutch grass by his feet.

"Ah, you see my friend that it's all about money." I didn't know which all he was referring to, but I nodded sagely anyway. "And all of this wealth is created from the misery of others."

"Ah well," I replied.

"Or from taking advantage of their mental illness... or misunderstanding of reality. I am a Brahmin," he announced. I believed him but mistrusted him just as much.

"What about positive products," I blurted, not out of any belief but more from an urge to keep him occupied for a few minutes.

"They rely on the weaknesses of human needs." I admitted to myself that I'd overlooked his challenge, even if I was taking the fight on short notice.

"Well, I suppose you got me there." I was beginning to like him but was still more interested in the dappled sequences the Sun was moving over my eyelids.

“What about when you are thinking that someone is a cheat or a fraud?”

“What about it? Sounds standard enough.”

“And when you finally find out for sure that they are a cheating person, how do you feel?” This question felt very trappy. I let it sink into the blue hexagons between my eyes and eyelids. “I will tell you, my friend. You still feel affronted; not because your ego was hurt when everyone was going against your opinion in the first place, but because your natural pre-thinking stage was denied. The great flow of Jagganath was offended. It was an assault on truth and you as a seeker of truth.” He paused for a few moments before adding “Am I wrong my friend?” I didn’t have another thought I could retain until I was back in the ghats.

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I stood firm on the lower steps of a ghat adjacent to Mannikaran, aware that letting my body sway could be a disaster. I was almost numb, partly down to my superstition that as it was my last night in Varanasi, I should dose myself to retain something of the ancient city and its never-ending funeral flow. As small boats edged closer to a nearby pyre, I saw a cadaver wrapped in cloth come free from the arms of a cremator and, like a tree receiving the ultimate axe blow, stiffly crash onto the edge of a circling boat, tipping the oarsman into the sacred river and splashing the funeral goers. Pawing skywards with outstretched arms, I wasn’t sure if the family was admonishing the god of gods or exulting in the late blessing they’d received.

“So, you’re going in the morning.” Amanda’s voice lent an instant clarity to my fazing. I turned and nodded, narrowing my eyes at the Sun haze behind her head. The light was leaving her face in deep shadow, but it seemed startlingly clear. She stood beside me; there was no need to talk. After about twenty minutes, the noise from the ceremony on the adjacent ghat began to fade. We turned together and walked to a nearby wall, leaning against it. “What are you looking for up there?” she asked.

“Where... the mountains?”

“Yeah.” Without affectation, she protruded her lips slightly before her face softened.

“Nothing really. I just like not being moored to anywhere while at the same time being moored to everywhere.”

“How do you mean?”

“People like to moor themselves, either to their hometowns or countries. Even the ones who come here on some freedom buzz end up mooring themselves to one place or another. I’m not into it. I like being moorless; because when you are, you’re moored to everywhere.”

“I thought you told me you were looking for some rare plant up there that will stop you feeling pain when women play you out.”

“Well that too... did I really say that?”

“Yep.” Amanda smiled her natural smile. “So you can be emotionally immune to our games. Then you rapped about sleeping and never seeping, or something.”

“That was that good smoke I brought down from the mountains.” She shook her head, smiling as she glowered at me.

“There’s nothing wrong with being honest.” At least she didn’t tilt her head and look into my eyes as she said it.

“Thanks,” I replied.

“Okay, I mean straightforward. I know it’s lost love that has you like this.”

“Yes, but do you know what love you’re talking about?”

Amanda walked a few feet away, looked down at the step and lifted her eyes to me. “I know lost love when I see it. I’m a professional.”

“You’re right, and that’s what allows me to observe clearly. But it was love for an idea, or an ideal, and without that love nothing has any value to me.”

“Nothing?”

“Precisely nothing: the most beautiful of all ideals.” I knew my words might hurt her, and it was the furthest thing from my intention... speaking without protection.

We walked back through the alleyways in a silence only punctuated by the few clear switches we encountered when I turned and smiled at the gaps we’d found. Her egoless acceptance far exceeded my absence of qualms. There was nothing grasping as we navigated the spaces between us. Even as some social distance whirled about us as we sat inside a droning café and ate our last meal together, I saw our walks infused with secret lightness. And

when some haughty klutz at an adjacent table rattled on about how a woman can break a man in a moment if that man is in love with her, the prism between us never became disjointed. The klutz laid it out how the man would be broken, with each supporting argument diminishing the truth behind her initial revelation until she eventually painted herself into a dunce's corner, but we kept on in silence.

By the time a waiter collected the notes I'd placed on top of an illegible bill, I noticed the restaurant had filled up. And for the first time that evening, the gnawing chatter of tourists began to filter into my consciousness. I raised my voice as if in mid-conversation and Amanda looked at me quizzically before smiling. "I don't want to tell you the name of the town. I promised the Brahmin elder I wouldn't let any other people know about it. It's not even on a map. You have to walk through the mountains for three days to get to it." Amanda smirked as I continued, answering a question she didn't ask. "A cross between Burmese Buddhism and ancient Shaivate thought, the people living in seamless harmony." I paused for a few seconds before spouting out random words: "Old gold, the last remaining, ancient Babylonians, lost tribes, true knowledge, the original great thinkers." Before I surreptitiously checked, I knew eyes were on me. I felt zero guilt at leading lambs, knowing they'd fantasize an endless stream of garbage in the following weeks.

The last time with Amanda deserved a purer continuation, but whether it was sophomore sarcasm or a genuine attempt to have a lark in my final moments with her, it was borne from a sense of completion. The final embrace outside the guesthouse I was staying in, spurning a farewell smoke for lone wonderings deep into the early hours, sober despite the chain chillum smoking, left an imprint on me so marked that it still passes through me fleetingly during moments of clarity.

I rolled out of Varanasi the following day with an uppity professor blaring his English all over the back of the bus. He wanted everybody to know how people will do anything or wear anything for that matter if it positions them favourably within their social group, even though objectively their behaviour is ridiculous and without merit. This becomes obvious as soon as they are detached from that social group and hurled into another one, he

concluded. I didn't even bother to check my brain to see if I agreed with him. I was too busy thinking about the three clear markers I'd experienced in the previous months. I was sure there were more to come, and I was equally positive that it was shadowing me again and planting dark seeds in the fertile if weak areas of my mind. But I still didn't know if I was witnessing its form in other people's behaviour.

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## ***CHAPTER TWENTY***



It took about four hours of mental triangulating before Landell accepted he'd taken the wrong bus. The first couple of times he blurted "Agra" to a square-looking passenger sitting across from him he was met with a friendly smile and casual nod. He should have been there already, but the crowded city streets outside revealed no tourist skin. Landell began to lurch from side to side, desperately trying to confirm where he was by reading the elaborate information on random shop fronts. The name Ujjain kept cropping up. Frantically flipping through a guidebook he'd guiltily stowed in the bottom of his backpack for emergencies, he saw the obligatory visit to the Taj Mahal recede as he traced his eyes over the imaginary line on a map his bus was carving towards Indore. An infantile rage ascended through his chest before halting at the latent depressive zone guarding his brain.

At Indore, anger fused with the last remnants of adventure induced Landell to blindly jump onto a bus pulling out of the station. He had no idea where it was going and didn't bother asking anybody. It was three hours into the journey by the time the conductor made his way to the rear of the bus, where Landell's cramped body pressed up against his rucksack was playing dead. After a few hefty prods from some chancer dressed in an army uniform, he wearily engaged, waving his hand and repeating "next town." Deliberations among the surrounding passengers and the conductor concluded with Morshi, and they repeated the word until Landell shrugged and nodded. He'd arrived at his destination.

It was a three-street town, a long thoroughfare bookended by a narrow quite road heading eastward at its northern end and a short stretch running westward into a dirt track at the southern end. There was just the one hotel, white with green borders, set back from the road halfway up the

street; a couple of dhabas, which both closed early; and a general store, where Landell snagged a green pen and a flimsy A4-sized copybook. The mere inquiry of any other places to eat around town sent the hotel manager into a long-winded surly reproach. Smack in the middle of mother India, Landell felt at the end of the world. The first night, spent traipsing up and down the main street in a stubborn search for something to do or see, had left him convinced he'd be hopping on the next bus to pass through town. But the peaceful resignation with which he accepted the following morning's news that there wouldn't be any busses for the next two days made him question what chain of events had brought him there. And when taking an afternoon jaunt up to the northern end of town he'd spotted the bright yellow walls of an international telephone booth, his fate was sealed. It took nearly a minute of feint ringtone before the other end picked up and the meter whirled into action, hurtling towards a fifty-rupee fare before Landell had established who he was talking to.

"I still haven't received your first draft," Sinclair declared in a needling tone.

"Yeah well, you know the Indian postal service isn't the quickest."

"I'm expecting tales of lost civilizations, dusky romance, oriental intrigue; and don't forget a nice dose of spirituality. This is meat and drink for a writer of your ability."

"I'm coming home in a week or two. I've just got to change my ticket."

"So, you're almost finished... excellent. Ready to let me know the title yet?" Landell could just about make out background male and female voices in conversation with Sinclair. Muffled laughter crept through the line. "Are you still there, my star writer?" Landell breathed through his nose and waited. "Don't forget: Every book is just waiting to be written."

"Maybe, but years ago there were fewer people writing and a lot more stories available. Everybody's writing a book these days."

"But," replied Sinclair, "there's much more happening now and so much more to write about. How much exactly, I don't know. I've never been good with numbers, but something close to infinity I'd say."

"I'll phone you again in a few days. I just need to break the back of this book. I'll send you something soon."

"And don't forget time. Make sure it's of its time."

"What does that mean?"

"Just think about where we're at. On the wave, I mean. And remember: it always takes fifteen years for a century to find its identity. So subtract that from where we are now, and pave the way for a limbic revolution."

"What did you say?" A prolonged crackle lit up Landell's ear, and Sinclair's voice came in and out in waves.

"Reading, reading," I said. "I'll set one up for you in Camden."

"I'm writing it. You don't expect me to read it for people too, do you?" The line went dead.

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The simple attraction of the hotel's facade belied the flaking walls inside Landell's room. A portable television with rusting rabbit's ears only held his attention for a few moments before he assigned it to his mental dustbin. It was a barren room, with any furnishings leaving embarrassed echoes in his judgement. But within a few hours, the scent of mosquito coils and burning wax were the only things seeping into Landell's consciousness. The words were flooding out of him; even when he hit bumps in the narrative, reels of concise prose would fill the spaces until his story could be kicked forward via another thought flashing through his mind.

The first night was the most difficult, but even that yielded five pages. The following three days were prolific. In tone and flow, the results felt like a second draft. It only needed a cursory edit, with a few markers to spruce up the plot and a



couple of abstractions to create intrigue. Some stretches of writing were so smooth Landell barely recollected piecing them together. And a number of passages had him feared up so much that he shuffled down to a broken down bank at the end of the main street and hassled the tellers into selling him blotting paper so he could retrace his steps. He stuffed those copies into his wallet.

His work turned into a routine of thinking in bed as soon as he woke up: at least an hour of downloading, formulating and storing. Then he would go downstairs for a breakfast of hard bread and boiled eggs, with three cups of chai. After that, it was back to writing during the hottest hours. In the late afternoon, he would do a couple of laps of the town before ambling down to the lakeside in a plaintive search for inspiration. Night-times were occupied by simple dinners and more writing. The last hour before sleep was earmarked for comforting thoughts of a new life back home. In these first few days, he hadn't even considered that the town's people were at their wits end over why he was there and who had sent him.

There was an almost joyous bent to Landell's early afternoon sessions by the fourth day, as his now lighter stomach needed no sustenance to fuel an endless stream of prose. It was an hour before he realized he had yet to write any dialogue... penning prose until the rising temperature had him meshing with the bedsheets he was reclining on, Landell sank in between. The morose seam that had lined his thoughts for the previous few weeks subsided as he wrote, but whenever he came up and tried to log what he was doing it would immediately return. After servicing his initial urge to check and go over in his mind what he was thinking and writing about, he began to shift patterns. Where before any attempted escape from disheartening feelings was met with scratchy realism, now he was numbed with dullness, his mind automatically driven by the physical. A momentary lapse would be redirected by some signal from Nature through a candlelight flame flickering on his bedside locker, a redirection of his head's tilt would catch a

beam of dusk creeping through the space the curtains wouldn't quite cover. The plotless story soon began to take a shape of its own. It was more than just a beginning, middle and end with a fill-in-the-gaps approach. A meandering line was taking form. Any attempt to shoehorn an idea into the narrative or insert any of the usual tools of the trade left a jarring feeling. Landell's protagonist went to the places, both on and off the map, his writer couldn't navigate.

Within five days, the story had far exceeded Landell's experience. The weight he'd put down on the page had left him feeling something of value was in his possession, at least of value to him. A callow rush surged through him when he went outside on his now mandatory evening walks, both fearful and excited at the prospect of somebody breaking into his room and stealing his belongings. Most likely they would foolishly leave the folder behind. But the quiet of the lakeside stilled his mind. Even the feint toxic glow on the water's surface couldn't deflect him. Eerily, it became more attractive than the countless stretches of beach he'd found. Scoping the lake's expanse and framing its far side had lent him a clarity he couldn't have hoped for. In these moments, Landell would shoot a sober fragment of lapsed depression around his synapses. It was still there with him he admitted to himself, but easily covered by one temporary joy or another.

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One afternoon the following week, by which time Landell had lost count of the days he'd been staying in a village outside Morshi, a break in his train of thought left him thinking about the yellow awning on the phone exchange. He headed back to the outpost, unsure if he was phoning in an update out of boredom, for some sort of parental pat on the head or because he wanted to hear the whirring of the telephone meter.

An electro-acoustic sound kept rising before fading away as Landell dialled Sinclair's number. He didn't know where it was

coming from and held a finger against his free ear to try to control it; nothing changed. "Sinclair."

"Ahh... my writer."

"What?" Landell dismissed his feeling of surprise.

"I know you're writing. Is there anything you need?"

"No, everything is fine. It's going well."

"From you, that means things are going perfectly. You're a writer. And writers have got to write. How's India? Have you got it yet?"

"No. It's all, well... I suppose I'm a bit disillusioned, as weak a word as that is. But I've broken the back of the book. I think I'm going to finish it here, and then spend a couple of days in Bombay. I'll get it printed up there and send you a copy."

"What? Printed?" Sinclair sounded like a middleman fearing the run around.

"Just so you can read it... typed up."

"Sure you don't need anything? Can't you send me what you've got so far?"

"No... not from here."

"Where are you, anyway?"

"Some little nowhere town. It's perfect for the imagination."

"Doesn't sound like it." The line began to crackle violently.

"The imagination is running the show. I'll be..." The line went dead. Landell read the meter as the agent insisted "call was coming back presently" and dropped a hundred rupee note on the desk before easing his stiffened frame towards the lake.

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As Landell looked across the water one last time to barely visible shifting land, he auto-reminded himself that it was only two bus trips and a train journey to Mumbai. And then just a few errands to be run and he would be back to the fullness of London. He might even have a day or two to kill in Mumbai; time to take a day trip or a jaunt around the city life of the latest

players. As he went through the permutations like an obedient student, the rustle of feet sounded behind him. It was the first time he'd been disturbed on one of his trips down to the lake, leaving him feel wronged as he turned to see a bright red clad monk blinking his eyes rapidly, seemingly enthralled. "You are deep thought," the monk declared in an almost shrill tone. Landell shook his head to the halfway line. "You are strong," continued the monk. Landell raised an eyebrow. "But remember, there is great weakness in strength and great strength in weakness." Landell inhaled deeply, filling his lungs with the scent of putrid incense emanating from the monk's robes. To compromise, he walked along the bank towards the dirt road a few hundred metres away. The bright red robes followed dutifully, determined to instil understanding in one adrift from the herd. "Do you understand my words," he asked, wafting his robes for a reason Landell couldn't figure out.

"Yeah, the weak are strong and the strong are weak. Right?" Landell was determined not to let his beliefs undermine his scepticism.

"Oh, you have much to learn. Let me explain it to you." The monk walked a couple of steps ahead of Landell, assuming he would be followed, but turned in disbelief as his novice began to drift off the path towards a knoll overlooking the village. "Okay, we can speak on the hill," added the monk. "It's all about the misunderstanding of those who think they are strong. But in the end, they are weak because..." Landell breathed rapidly to distort his hearing. When he couldn't maintain the intake, the words began to creep in again. "And because of this, the weak are really strong. Now do you understand?"

"Well, it's a bit complicated. I don't know."

"I can meet you tomorrow possibly. We can eat together and you will understand more."

Landell clicked his tongue and put some distance between himself and his teacher. "I have to leave in an hour. I'll be in Bombay tomorrow."

"Oh, Bombay is not a good place. You should stay here. Bombay is small. There is more to learn here. Here is more full." An unlikely wave of pity came over Landell as he saw the knitted forehead of a desperate merchant.

"I have business to do." Landell spat the grime out of his mouth and walked down the other side of the knoll and towards his exit.

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He had the earthy look of a tradesman but with the detached gaze of an ascetic as he smirked at Landell struggling to light up the butt of a *biri* cigarette. The bus was late, but a couple of locals had assured him it would be there soon. He attempted to light another *biri*, quickly accepting fate had given him a dud and began to lap his prone rucksack to kill some time. The non-godliness of Landell's latest watcher left a wiry feel in the air. As he circled and lit a third smoke, Landell felt an attraction despite not wanting to deal with a random with no agenda piercing him with another truth. "Why do you have that expensive bag?"

Landell looked up to see an unnerving visage and felt a reflexive need to defend his tribe. "To carry shit in..."

"Shit... yeah." The man chuckled. "But do you really need hundred-dollar bag to carry in shit?" He shifted around but remained sitting on a hessian sack as Landell wrestled with whether to keep on defending his culture or walk away telling himself that a poor person asking real questions was simply suffering from ill manners. "I'm sorry friend," he continued. "I'm not hating you, but it's funny how it goes through tribal customs to Nature."

"Thanks for letting me know." Landell dropped his head churlishly.

"No problem. There's no point keep up with latest trends in tourist fashion when they are balancing on top of a deep running foundation." Landell, eyes squinted, looked towards his

inquisitor. With the sun now down, the darkened angles about his face obfuscated any Asian slope, instead taking on the nameless significance of an amalgam of faces Landell had seen throughout his youth.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



I'd been warned about Bihar, but the prospect of danger peeled away as my numbed mind decoded new images while allowing memories of Amanda to recede. I didn't have even a loose plan anymore; I was putting all my chips on the primordial. And something else had changed. I still felt I possessed the energy to swipe away the constant stream of ego delirium I was encountering, but a sort of indifference had set in... not that tired, affected ennui I avoided in other people. But there was something. Maybe I just needed a couple of days of going through the motions.

I was flipping these threadbare notions over in my head as I stepped off the bus at Patna Station. And I didn't want to fuck with the tired ceremony of getting situated in another sprawling urban mess. Like a surly child, I was closed to the idea of looking between human activity and seeing the rich history of Patna, its ancient waves and the ghosts that still hinted at their existence. As I stalked vendors in search of the water, biscuits and samosas that would carry me through 'til the morning, the unforgiving tone of hopped up public-school impatience sliced through the air. "Luke. Ha ha ha." I turned and was surprised at being so glad to see him. "It's good to see a sane face," he blasted for everyone to hear, holding his hand out towards mine. Cam had gotten himself a bristling tan since Mannikaran, the crow's feet around his eyes lending him a sly charisma depleted by his insistence on wearing a red neckerchief. He was necessary. "Fucking monks crawling all over this place, handing out books for free of course to hook the ever-increasing swell of dipshit tourists. Fucking flakes in a line to Bodhgaya can't cash the *sangha* up quick enough to be among other sheep, all trying to gain a bit of social status."

"The sangha," I repeated.

"Yes. Those organized pricks. I mean I have nothing against Buddhists. Nice people on the whole." He gently took the bottle of water that I'd just purchased from my hand. "You don't mind, do you?" I left mine on the bus."

"Where are you heading to?" I asked.

“Varanasi. I suppose I’ve got to see the show. Do you know what the really sick thing is? If a lone wolf like me, or you for that matter, doesn’t follow the lambs to the slaughter, the fucking monks can delude themselves into thinking they’re old school, like in the sutras or whatever they’re called. It’s a win-win.”

“Varanasi is worth a visit. I’ve just come from there.”

“Did you find any decent place to stay?”

“Yeah. I’ll draw you a map.” I took a pen and someone’s card from the side pocket of my rucksack and wrote down enough to keep him high and dry. “When’s your bus leaving?”

“In ten minutes. Fucking bunch of Germans and Swedes. Bloody Japanese as well, but at least they stay quiet.”

“You don’t seem too sold on these ideas to be flitting between Bodhgaya and Varanasi,” I prodded.

“Buddhism, Hinduism, Catholicism and just about all the others use the same tired model of presenting a mystical multi-levelled spiritual knowledge hierarchy that can only be traversed by so-called experts, who in turn appeal to the worst in people by manipulating their brains through the use of symbols and colours.”

I laughed freely, secretly impressed at how tight his argument was. “You sound as sure as a crusading scientist in your lack of belief.”

“You know I’m fucking right. These religions have no interest in reality. We might both be full of it, but at least we’re looking. Fucking religions use the same model as corrupt companies, banging and whoring and living large while the followers fool themselves instead of having the balls to draw a line under their delusions and following a path of truth.”

“You should write a book about that, mate,” I responded.

“Fuck that. And have some bug-eyed minion stick an ice-pick through my heart.”

“What about the Hares?”

“Oh please. They’re just like marketing interns: they’d hawk any shit for money. They’re closer to salesmen than to the thing we’re looking for. The real answer is outside the scope of all of these chancers. Speaking of which; look at these dozy hippies.” He pointed to a small group of tourists milling around the bus stand.

“Ah come on. Hippies are okay,” I protested.



“Well, the original ones were alright, but these fucking tools are just as bad as the people they think they’re rising up against.”

“Take it easy, man. They can probably hear you.”

“Good. Somebody needs to tell them.”

I turned to see the youngest of a foursome of fisherman-pants wearing public school-educated tourists marching towards us. He had decades of suppression etched on his face. “Why are you being so aggressive towards us, man?” he demanded with a clenched jaw.

“I was being emphatic, and I’m emphatically telling you that you fuckers haven’t got anything for me. You clueless bunch of gloops, peddling garbage that has no place in reality. While you are spouting bullshit about how society makes us do bad things, I’m ripping through my brain with DMT. Now do you understand?” I turned to hide my delight. For all his bluster, I knew he wasn’t a fighter, and the young hippie wasn’t going to do himself any favours with his social strata if he threw down to defend their honour.

An immaculately braided honey-haired woman of about twenty-five approached to blind us into submission. “Why do you have to be so cynical?” she asked both of us.

Before I attempted to awaken her to what had been happening, he pounced. “Me... cynical? I’ve never worked for a commercial company, I try to improve myself and I produce art. What do you do? Anyway, why do you care about others’ progress; shouldn’t you be focusing on your own?” Her head shuddered slightly as she led her man away from us. “I’d better head off Luke; my bus is about to pull out. This constant fucking each other and shaving edges; I suppose it’s more or less the same as the West, no matter how different tourists think it is here. It was nice running into you again. Take it easy. I’m Cam by the way.” And he was gone.

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The denseness of continuous feel was already draped over me before I could calculate how far past the city limits our bus had gone. We’d stopped on the outskirts of Patna after thirty minutes to eat dinner in one of those roadside open-air restaurants where the

only thing I could trust was rice and steamed vegetables. And even there, jagged uneasiness in the air persisted, a sense of trepidation in the geography of the land. As the bus rolled into the darkness, the feeling was different to any of the other danger areas I'd been warned of. Here, it was less about a conflict or the usual story of two sides competing for an area of resources and summoning any god and notion of state they could to justify their marauding. Instead, it was deep rooted; as in rooted in the land, in the lines between settlements and the remnants of the lives that had traversed the fields and sprung from older tribal enclaves. At some point in the distant past, the balance of space had been violated and from then on, the unrelenting burr of simmering conflict had remained.

I'd always brushed off the threat of internecine disputes in India with a combination of deluded invulnerability and the knowledge that it was simply people fighting over the spoils of Nature. But nothing had prepared me for deepest, darkest Bihar. It was not so much a creeping fear as a tentacled fugue that suddenly had you by the throat, leaving you gasping for oxygen like a novice smoker. Even the jabbing finger of a rotund teacher demanding to know why all Western stories were filled with sex and violence wasn't enough to break the flow of dark energy. "Why can't you write something pure and beautiful," he demanded.

"Like the Mahabharata?" I replied, and I was back in the enveloping darkness of the fields of Bihar. Whether from tiredness or fear, I soon felt my body ceding as the fires demarcating outposts of habitation became fewer. We went a while between roadblocks set up by villagers demanding baksheesh for the temerity of our driver using a supposedly public back-road. I lolled and veered between visions of illuminated sodium slants piercing the bus and truncated thoughts refusing to lie down. Somewhere along those back-roads of Bihar I lost track of time, barely aware of the jolting stops that almost hopped me out of the fear-laden dreams I was experiencing. It was only when a halting bump in the road woke me up proper that I registered the overwhelming energy of impending death. I was in survival mode, and panic was all around me. I could see nothing outside, but the burning staffs and raised voices of the locals wouldn't be placated by the pleading bus driver. As a moment of Western clarity as to why I'd marooned

myself for some tenuous reason bludgeoned me, I was rescued. The glow of gold that permeated every portion of my being was serene, the climactic flow through my body's pressure points lasting less than a minute before the omniscient expression of knowledge relaxed me entirely. I'd been saved by her, the holder of all energies. I was humbled yet slyly egotistical that she had chosen me to lay her hand on.

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The last signpost I remember seeing in Bihar was for Araria. Sometime after that, with dawn breaking, the danger had subsided. I still felt a bit uneasy about getting off the bus; there was something iron-like about the air, a feel of rusting scythes wafting by the back of my head, even if the locals were only just rising from their beds. The next crossroads came quickly, and I knew this was my spot. The bus driver remonstrated as I asked him to stop, insisting that the road northwards went to nowhere, but that was perfect—a dead end road, leaving me at the border. I would cross unhindered in this sparsely populated stretch, hitch as far north as possible and then walk through the Singilila Forest into Sikkim.

I wasn't sure if I was still in Bihar as I crossed cane fields, but this was a totally different domain, immune to the tribal wrangling that had seared through the heart of the state. I was in a corner of India that had been criss-crossed by traders, Buddha's disciples and ancient Aryan sects. I couldn't see a soul, but it was full beyond comprehension. As the Sun showed up on the eastern horizon, its amber set against the feint blue-black of the morning sky, I swept my eyes across the scene in search of the Moon. I could just about trace its outline, and there were stars, becoming fainter but definitely there. It was another marker, flicking me back through the intervening months to the starry night when I'd encountered a *nadi* reader. The same breath lining my stomach that I'd felt then came back to me. It was that thing about India that had been disintegrated by the search and the viral tourist towns promising its presence, where only the fabrications of determined tourists kept the word perpetuating. But in one form, maybe its most serene, it still existed—in the spaces between habitations, in the untouched swathes of land and in the traces of those who had known its

source. The mathematics behind it was the strongest. This thing could be felt by any or all, and there was no need to verbalize it. It was the calmest, deepest and most revealing of all the streams that had passed through me as I moved through those places and spaces. Those stars of India wouldn't fall, and however weak they would become, their passing light would outlast this game and stay behind me in the sky, showing themselves when they were good and ready.

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I paused and looked around the dishevelled abodes, a broken down truck the only sign of contact with the outside world. The smell of ice in the hills up above came to me, and between us laid the dispersed cottages of locals working the few remaining patches of arable land in these arid foothills. It was bleak, an uninviting white creeping between the gravelly tracks. I asked myself what the fuck I was doing in this mountain town, but still I was connected from and through Nature, even to the sullen glares of the freaked-out locals. Passing the last couple of homes, with Sulubung to the east, I ignored the confused warnings of a woman hanging up clothes on a makeshift washing line. She seemed to think I didn't know that the road would stop abruptly a mile on.

I cut eastwards through a narrow gorge to join up with a river that would lead me to the border, but I had no idea of the lay of the land. As I tried to come up with some plan for sidestepping the inevitable border post, I couldn't string any thoughts together. Every idea was being dissected and spliced with the remnants of memories upon entering my mind. I stopped at a small clearing by the river and rooted in my bag for my Walkman. Opening its rear casing, I took out the batteries and rubbed them in my hands for a minute, blowing on them with my hot breath. Then, I checked the tape, flashing back to how I'd mixed it from vinyl selectively collated over my last weekend back home. It was no use; nothing. I took them out again and selfishly abused the energy bequeathed to me, gripping them while allowing thoughts to completely disengage and the *Rigpa* to collapse in on itself. I knew this would be good for five to ten minutes of listening. The small ball of green that became dislodged from the space between the battery holders confirmed

that I'd picked up on the message. Digging again deep in my side pocket, I pulled out my excuse of a writing pad and retrieved the rolling papers functioning as an underused bookmark.

Pure blasts of slightly woody green trickled in as some instrumental version of a Mayfield track I barely recognised filtered through me. And then I was mountain jumping, clearing levels as I'd once done so easily before I consigned meditation to the dustbin of my imagined progress. That may have been one of the more reckless mistakes I'd made. And gliding along that river bank, cutting away from the border to cross a military road far enough away from the checkpoints to avoid detection before looping back towards the forest through an eerily uninhabited area, I was blissfully unaware as I synthesized the jumping with the illuminated darkness of the nadi, the keyboards through the music with the weed. And all flowed with the unmistakable hit of when the pineal drives everything and you end up laughing at your ridiculous assumption that you need to intervene in any way at all.

The forest was perfect, the bottle green canopies serving as protection from any paranoia about army units drilling in the area, cruelly intercepting me just a couple of hours from the relative safety of the hills around Darjeeling. Once there, I imagined being apprehended and playing the dumb tourist card: "Oh... just went for a day's trekking and I must have made a mistake. It's always been my dream to visit here. Did I make a mistake?" And filing it all away with a "fuck it" as a bent soldier issued an on-the-spot fine of a couple of hundred rupees. I'm pretty sure I wasn't high anymore, or thrilling from the prospect of coming across some lesser spotted Himalayan fauna, as I booted through the forest. It was more the exhilaration of getting through uncharted zones while knowing I was on the way out of any bullshit and towards the hollow comfort of being in a designated tourist spot. I was through the forest in a couple of hours, trees flashing by and trusting in the Sun to direct me straight to the other side. Apart from those flashes of silver and bottle green, the only memory that stays strong with me was the unusual smell of the trees. It was the smell of Nature never culled.

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I sat on the steps of the only official looking building I could spot, a rare visitor to the hill station of Kalong. I'd only planned to stay the night, but that changed after getting into a lengthy post-breakfast exchange with the proprietor of an atmospheric wooden inn I was staying at. In my delirium at the prospect of eating a square meal and putting my head down, I thought I'd entered a hotel the night before. The next morning, I realized the boss was being olden cool by letting me sleep in the airy, spare room with its four-postered bed. And as I shovelled a second mushroom omelette into my unapologetic mouth, he began to tell me of how this sleepy town had once been the party outpost of Allied forces waiting to roll down the Stilwell Road and stop the Japanese in their tracks as soon as the local Indian workers had paved the way. He retold tales of excess, generous GIs and how people came from as far as Kathmandu to get in on the action. It seemed unlikely as I looked around at what the town had become, but in those wooden walls, the trails of optimistic brotherhood between Westerners, Lepchas, Assamese and Sikkimese still rang faintly. I didn't need proof, but he insisted on rooting in a storeroom for the best part of twenty minutes, three whiskeys in, until he pulled out a black and white photograph of his father flanked by an American and a British soldier. He swore he was somewhere in the room at the time, a six-year old boy just out of camera-shot. Now fifty, he was showing signs of a man with crushed dreams. He kept on looking for affirmation, which I happily gave him, but he was never mawkish or irritating; just a good guy with a simmering drink problem. The next day as I caught him sneaking out to secure some contraband beef, he seemed embarrassed at his brotherly insistence on body contact the previous night. I liked him.

The kids in the town square squealed with excitement as the first stalls opened for business; it seemed like I'd arrived in town for one of the highlights of the social calendar. I felt small as I auto-judged the tacky goods on sale and the rickety boredom of the few prototypical fairground rides on offer. But right there, in that perfect time when the Sun was just about to set, I was taken on a quick jaunt of all the past markers I could remember from that time of year. And for the first time on the subcontinent, I could feel an internal marker in effect. There was some kind of shift in sentience,

and it seemed to subsume or at least be totally divorced from the unspeakable it, which hadn't reared its head for a few days.

At first, I thought it was the innkeeper approaching, but it was someone else of mixed mountain stock, his bright Sun-parched skin and strong shoulders offset by perfect almond eyes and a weak moustache. "Why not drinking?" he asked.

"Just watching," I replied cheerfully.

"This is big celebration today. I thought English liked to drink. How you say? Abluting?"

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"Yes, those cultures that move farther away from God usually drink more to close the distance. Maybe they are trying to cure themselves. Abluting," he announced.

"Ablutions," I exclaimed, like a dimming Archimedes.

"Yes, that is what I'm saying." He sat down beside me on the step and placed his hand on my knee. Surprisingly, I didn't flinch.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't say God. I mean in Nature, beside Nature. I know we are all the same distance to God." I smiled and we both fell silent, watching the children down below multiply in number.

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I felt sorry for Sonam as he totted up my bill. Checking myself, I reminded my brain that I was pitying one of the richest men in town while I faced a mountain of debts back home. But I did, and I wasn't sure whether it was for the withering lost dreams etched around his eyes or for the slow business he was doing. I felt nothing at my apparent softening as I dropped a big bill down and shook my head at his promise to bring my change in a moment.

"Are you okay," I asked. He held his head to one side and pursed his lips.

"What is it you Americans say... if you can't marry the woman you love, love the woman you marry."

I paused, refusing to get into how that was wrong in so many ways. "It will be okay," I assured him. I felt like a moron for saying that.

"Tell me, Luke. How can you win an argument against a woman?"

“I wouldn’t know about that. I only argue with men; keep to my level.”

“It seems the only way to win an argument against a woman is to go deeper into crazy than they do.”

“Does that work?” I was suddenly interested in Sonam’s line of thinking.

“Ahh...” He held his hands up in an apparent move to dismiss everything, but he just let them slump to his side. “I don’t know. She is not a bad wife, but sometimes... I don’t know.”

“Don’t worry about it.” I nodded to him and held my hand up as I began on my way. It was his slowly disappearing horizons that stayed with me.

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The taxi driver I’d hailed on the outskirts of Gangtok was proving to be just as dodgy as me. The downside of this was his burgeoning suspicion at my plans as he drove me towards the Bhutanese border. But in the shadow of Kanchenjunga he was quick to produce some very nice Gangtok Green, assuring me he only took a couple of hits to deal with the stress of being a driver. When I told him I was a naturalist studying insects of the region, he guffawed. He had me pegged for somewhere between a cop and a smuggler, so much so that he wouldn’t hook me up with a score. He would, however, give me a rundown on the history of the local mountain people. That was his specialty, and he launched into it like a man on a mission. “Most people don’t even know about their own ancestors anymore. But we are different people, although I have to say I’m a mixture. A lot of people are, though they never admit it. They just attach themselves to one name: Lepchas, Sikkimese, Tibetan, Nepali.

“Mmm, interesting,” I replied, and it was.

“Most Westerners thinking Tibetans came down from Heaven, that they are some kind of god people.”

“They are popular with some people back in the West alright.”

“Yes,” he sneered. “Every white tourist I pick up thinks they are angels. But they have caused more shit around here than anybody else.” I began to imagine shrewd Tibetans undercutting



local hoteliers and running evils of the night. "They were constantly invading here for more than one thousand years." He was taking me all the way back. "I am Lepcha. We are the real owners of these lands, but of course many people wanted our hidden rice valleys."

"I thought you said you were a mixture," I replied,

"Well, my mother is Lepcha, and my father is half Nepali and half Bhutanese... but I am Lepcha."

"I believe you." The mountain weed almost had me high, but not quite.

"Yes. Many people say we came from China or Tibet, but that is bullshit. We have been here for thousands of years, since before your Alexander. We fought against him." My history and geography plates were spinning. "The old king's family came from Tibet; he's not really Sikkimese."

"When did his family come here?"

"Ah, about six hundred years ago," he said dismissively.

"Interesting." I was drawn to enquire further but wary of a potential blow-up.

"Yeah. I suppose you're going to sneak into Bhutan," he continued.

"No, no. That would be illegal."

"You might be able to do it. Your skin is dark enough.

Anyway, who are the government to stop you?" I remained silent. "I'll tell you who—a bunch of Tibetans, that's who. And they just kicked out Nepalis living there for as long as they have."

"So, who are the real Bhutanese then?" I was praying he would say the Lepchas.

"Well, the Mongpas are the real owners of the land. But they were mostly shoved out east, into Arunachal. And the Lepchas have been there for long too."

"Right." I felt a sense of relief. "So it's Sikkim for the Lepchas, and Bhutan for the Mongpas. And where should the Tibetans go to?"

"Yes, that is the problem. Ah, we should stop here." He pulled over to a clearing in the trees, assuring me I was just a mile from the border. "Cover your face with a hat. You may get away with it. But you'll need to stay high, away from the lowlands."

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about.” He turned and gave me a bullet-shaped clump of cannabis plant and smiled. I winked and got out of the car.

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It’s a funny feeling finally being in a place you’ve yearned to visit only to find out you’re officially not welcome. It makes you want to get the fuck out as soon as possible, but not before you’ve got your value. I felt dimly aware of feeling guilty for thinking in such a way, so I tried to dismiss it along with all those other attachments or conceits that still leaked out of my default thinking from time to time.

I’d been warned of the checkpoints populating any roads leading away from the Paro and Thimpu valleys. Before I’d even gotten out of the forest straddling the border with Sikkim, I decided that my fantasy of poncing through the Bhutanese highlands, living off the fat of the land and the occasional rice feed at conveniently located pit stops was just that. Begrudgingly, I resigned my mind to that ghastly tourist realm of visiting places just to tick them off on some imaginary list of conquest. I was now just a step away from taking photographs of myself underneath signs showing must-see landmarks. Cursing my hollowness as I marched around Paro, I began formulating a plan to return to India and then skip back across the border into south-eastern Bhutan, soliciting some rebel Mongpa monk to guide me through the real zones on the way into Arunachal and freedom. The reality was more to do with my unwillingness to face up to the bureaucratic nightmare involved in obtaining an actual visa, and the attached ramped-up costs, all in the name of preserving the country’s culture.

Six or seven miles to the north of Paro stood the cliff temple of Taktsang. This was another marker that the vestiges of Vajrayana Buddhist inclination within me felt a duty to honour. I knew I was emptying myself of that supposed paragon of non-self, and even those inner and outer tantras as well as the fourfold division were slipping. But I was still a sucker for dudes like Padmasambhava, who supposedly cruised into the area on the back of a black she-tiger before setting up a cloud-laden temple straight out of an eerie fantasy. And it was traipsing through the nearby pine forest and

arching my head around the rocks in the fading light to sneak a peep into the guru's cave that remain with me now. The temple, prayer wheels, offerings and adorned interiors have all since disappeared through endless holding offices.

Paro was neat and organized, with a fine line in local architecture propping up restaurants and an obscenely priced tourist hotel. Twenty minutes and I was through the town; my only action of note was to shamelessly pilfer a monk's robe drying on a line of rope out of sight of the closest dwelling. I justified this with a quick run-through in my head of the centuries of squeezing the local monks had put on the superstitious locals. Plus, I was following in the footsteps of pilgrims who'd been beating this path for the guts of a millennium. Before I could make my getaway, images came of a novice monk lamenting the loss of his grotesquely overpriced entry into communal respect. I crept back and pegged a crisp fifty-dollar note to the rope in its place—if it had cost anywhere close to that, we were both getting fucked to an extent that couldn't be evened out by a lifetime of karmic retributions. Behind a wall that looked suspiciously like a reassembled stupa, I put the robe on over my shoulders and pulled my black ribbed woollen hat over my eyes. In the night light with a bowed head, I comfortably made it aboard the bus to Thimpu. I would be safe there until I could come up with a plan to get across the border into Assam.

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"Yes, a pilgrimage through the ancient forests back into Assam, just like Guru Shenrab had taken." I was sticking to my guns, brazenly facing him down to sow enough doubt in his mind; I'd picked my mark well. Any monk loitering around middle-aged European tourists on Thimpu High Street was bound to have overlooked some of his history studies while bored shitless during his temple school days. "I can ask a friend," he said begrudgingly. "Maybe someone is heading in that direction."

"Why would they be?" I wasn't in the mood for timewasters.

"Visiting another temple," he replied. Business, I assumed.

I don't know why I didn't warm to Thimpu. Maybe it was the order underlain with a hint of authoritarian menace or the psychological hurdle presented by being in a capital city, but looking

back I think it was the words of the Sikkimese taxi driver; he'd pressed the right button. While part of me rowed along with those Westerners who automatically sided with smiling mountain people, my heart was with the displaced. The knowledge that the indigenous people of the land had been gradually shoved eastwards induced me to follow them, looking for a source that no longer resided in its original place. How could it now live in the displaced people? I kept my mind peeled, trusting that I may find the answer in between.

My monk guide was talking a good game, but I could see my insistence that we get out of the car and start walking before we reached the checkpoint at the next crossroads was beginning to test him. He kept repeating "you monk now," but I felt ridiculous with a cowl drooping over my head, highlighting the triangular nose within. No self-respecting checkpoint warrior would let me pass. I decided the next time the driver slowed down to light up one of his pine cigarettes I would hop out of the car and run for the hills. There was no way this monk would let a payday escape, and he didn't. He just warned me of tigers, but I had it fixed in my head they were only in Assam. "Tiger walk far," he kept repeating.

As we approached the late afternoon and I began to quiz him about possible caves to meditate and sleep in, I could see he was regretting taking this mission. I began to suspect that he'd been sent on some kind of penance for not pulling his weight in headquarters, but trying to cure laziness with a slog through the foothills of the Himalaya seemed like a bit of a leap. We'd been walking for less than an hour when he insisted on heading eastwards in the direction of the only navigable road in the area; the prick wanted to hitch a lift, but the road went directly to the border. I badgered him about respecting the spirit of the gurus he was supposed to honour when he began to look at me with the eyes of an addict who'd gone a full day without fixing. He flagged down the first car he saw and, panting frantically, implored a stuffy Indian tourist and his obese young bride to allow us to ride with them. It was a comedy of clashes: the Kshatriya reaching for Brahmin status appalled by having a Buddhist mendicant pulling rank on him, a surly bride throwing daggers with her eyes at a Westerner who would have preferred to ride in the boot and the two negotiators with money on their minds but lacking the wherewithal to strike a bargain as

they tried not to mention cash. Eventually, I declared we would be happy to cash them up for their inconvenience as a wedding token. All seemed churlishly content until I told my guide he would be getting less than he'd expected and that I'd be dumping his ass north of the border, which I'd be crossing myself on foot. He implored a re-think on my part, but I was too busy studying the map of the region I'd fished out of the glove compartment, hunched over in the passenger seat, happy in the knowledge that there were no pleasantries left to plough through. My conclusion was simple: I would jump ship at the severest hairpin bend and during the night cut through the final string of hills running down to the plains. There was virtually no chance of anyone seeing me crossing the border. I would be in India before dawn, where I could hitch and bus my way along the border until I reached the confluence of Assam, Arunachal and Bhutan. I would then cut back through Sonai into Bhutan and put my fate in the hands of the Mongpa.

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The feeling had already begun to set in as I walked away from Paneri, a skein of thoughts and fading memories, a synthesis of disappearing horizons and areas I continued to loiter around. From time to time, I felt the urge to check in on what I'd once thought I was supposed to be doing with my existence. But those duties suddenly seemed so brittle. Notions of a supposedly well-crafted life back in London seemed bereft of substance. Dreams of escape were as indulgent as using social status for a crutch. Even when I considered the book I was supposed to be writing, the only conclusion I could come to was that I hated writers for furtively, egotistically pleasuring themselves; if you're gonna jack off onto the page, go all out—make it a magnificent, shimmering wank. But I had more important things on my mind or, as one plastic mystic told me, my mind had more important things on me.

When I'd flippanantly remarked to a postal worker who'd given me a lift to the junction with a seven-mile stretch of road that led to the border that I was going to walk straight through to Sonai, he shook his head and muttered "suicide mission." But he'd given away enough to place himself in that category of philosopher-

manual worker that every city and country seemed to possess. This in itself assured me, as did my assumption that he'd thought I meant walking the area lengthways. Instead, I intended to cut right across its most narrow extremity, south to north, and take my chances. I figured I'd be unlucky to run into a tiger or a moody gaur. Besides, I was still convinced that animals didn't fuck with you if you didn't fuck with them. Even if I unfortunately came across a lair or a hunting ground, a quick bow and transmission of my vibrations to theirs would be enough to secure safe passage. Anyway, it was only five or six miles across dry grasslands until I hit the hills. The biggest danger was the same as the biggest danger anywhere else: people, especially those who had sold their souls to the nation state.

The streams were still coming, now as flashes of light; not those electric flashes that indicate receiving a mysterious signal, but as a calm sheet of faint illumination. They didn't follow a pattern of any sort, occurring without warning and reflecting a distant feel of quality, sometimes clumping in true randomness. The only things I could glean from these episodes were nadi symbols, and I wasn't sure if they were significant or just pure chance.

I followed a river out of the grasslands and up into the mountains, reminding myself that I hadn't seen one living creature on my journey through the park and beginning to suspect some crooked civil servants were exaggerating sightings to procure a bigger budget. I didn't know how far I would have to walk until encountering locals, but the river wasn't weak, so it was just a matter of time before running into some Mongpa. This was their land, the south-eastern corner of Bhutan, and crossing into Arunachal was routine. Within minutes, I was feeling the intersection I'd experienced months before in Spiti, but this time it was slightly mellower in the rusty landscape and copper sunshine. Those centuries-old tangents were strong all around me; I could almost see them. And it was like that for a couple of hours walking, me mesmerised by Mongpa ways.

The first person I saw was perched high on an escarpment that blocked my view of a village up ahead. I tried to navigate in the ascetic's direction, walking in a curve until I arrived on a rocky knoll some fifty feet below him. Just as I decided to move on and leave the man in the peace I'd found him in, a bronze-skinned almond-

eyed teenager in a wine-coloured smock came into range. “Uncle,” he called. I smiled and waved him over. When he arrived, I pointed to the old man sitting above. “*Laghu*,” he stated, nodding and smiling. It was only when I was safely dropped off over the border in Arunachal that my guide would tell me that *Laghu* appears once a day every day for about fifteen minutes and if any local addresses him, he replies with one word that blows the listener away and has the entire village trying to decipher it for weeks thereafter. I glanced back one last time to see whether *Laghu* had retired for the day or if the fuzzy image on top of the jagged slope was him before winking at the teenage boy in burgundy robes replete with rainbow headdress as he led me towards his village.

It was a basic affair, stone homes bereft of ornamentation and featuring only what was needed to eat and sleep comfortably. Wooden frames on the doors hinted at what was to come when I would stay with families on the other side of the border. But while in the village of Drupshing on the Bhutanese side, I was treated with confused hospitality; nobody could figure out what the fuck I was doing there. I spent three days waiting for the golden child of the village, who they’d invested most of their resources in and sent to college in the capital, to return home so he could ask me why I was there. In the meantime, they fed me well and made me as comfortable as they could. I spent my days wandering within a couple of miles of the village, envisaging the long-lost peoples who’d once flourished in the area. Gone for centuries, I assumed I was imagining that I could feel them. Still, on those late afternoon walks, I thought of idyllic tribes living in step with the natural surroundings. It was only on my last night, sitting by the open hearth and waiting to be served soup and rice by the ruddy-faced woman of the house, that I saw a row of six or seven books sitting on a chest of drawers behind her head. Her absent husband had apparently forbidden anyone from using them, but as I demonstrated tender hands in retrieving one, she allowed me to proceed, and just like in all the lazily scripted movies, the book flopped open on an image of an otherworldly fort atop a mountain, which through body language I made out was somewhere close by. Paging back and forth, I saw images of splendid stocks of foods and ceremonial armaments, festooned elephants and serenely focused artisans working on an array of goodies that would fill the

homes of the noble. I had no idea if I was looking at a novel or a history text, but in the background of every image was some semblance of what I'd been seeing on my walks of the previous few days. It was closing in, and it seemed everyone was relieved when Druk arrived early the next morning and woke me from my slumber.

I'm still not sure whether it was out of a sense of duty or necessity that he guided me from the village, but the reason was ultimately irrelevant. In every one of his words, positive or suspicious, he undermined not only individual cultures but the very concept of such things. Now, I only remember snippets: names of people he mentioned, villages we passed through and cheery dismissals of anything bordering on cultural observation or behaviour. "Why you talk about this culture and that culture?" he demanded. I vaguely remember giving him some spiel about being interested in the incredible variety of cultures in this remote corner of the Himalaya. "Culture is just many old habits and tastes joined together," he'd say. "It's not important." At first, I assumed he couldn't understand me. Where was the usual pride in an outsider showing interest in a local's culture? And what about the urgency to proclaim why his tribe or one he was loosely associated with was chosen. He'd no interest in such matters. "I understood exactly," he replied when I would question if I'd explained myself clearly; "I don't really want to deal with the people in this village," he sometimes stated on our rambles. I thought it was due to some local rivalry or pissing contest, but after a couple of days of walking and sleeping, I came to see it was nothing to do with competition or jealousy. Druk simply didn't give a fuck about any cultural angle being peddled by anyone. I think I mistook his detachment for arrogance initially, but in his casual interactions with various Mongpa, as well as other ethnicities I couldn't identify, he displayed an understated respect without a trace of affected brotherhood. "We're in Arunachal now by the way," he mentioned while lighting a cigarette on our third day of walking. "We passed Sela back there. We will be in Lada before Sun falls. Then I can put you on the trail to Seppa. I will turn back." I imagined his use of fall to coincide with some ancient legend of the Sun dropping into place after a celestial battle. "Most of the people here are okay; that man I gave a cigarette to earlier was Nissi. You can find Aka and Miri too; once



you get towards the centre, it's mostly Adi. All are fine once you can see past their cultures. I don't know about the Mishmi—they live in the north." Such observations always got me.

I spent three days with Druk in the lower Himalaya, but he threw away more incidental truth during that time than I could remember getting from the previous three years I'd spent pissing around the world. Whereas previous encounters in the mountains had usually come with a suspiciously drilled delivery, everything Druk uttered was with surety followed by a facial gesture signalling that he might not believe what he'd just said. And at the times when he seemed at peace with one of his statements, it was with shrugging shoulders and a feel of not really thinking it all made much of a difference anyway. But it was forever easy and never dismissive, even though the same undercurrent flowed through all of it. Fretting over understanding cultures was pointless, and pinning your colours to the cultural mast was juvenile at best and disingenuous the rest of the time. That lesson stayed with me as he left me at Seppa with a bag of nuts I couldn't identify before I walked deeper into Arunachal.

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I didn't hit a road for a couple of days after veering off the north-eastern path out of Seppa; it was mostly river plains with minor mountains. People were thin on the ground, and I was met with an occasional puzzled look from a farmer checking his demarcations as I ghosted by. A couple of cursory words in Hindi was usually enough to pass myself off as a government worker, now I was bearded and bronzed. From time to time, I felt like I'd missed a village that could have transported me to a district town to make my life easier, but I had long liked it that way. The rolling, vegetation-covered hills draped in mist, with higher snow-capped peaks in the distance, screamed of secluded tribes. And there were many, with animism widely practiced. But Christianity had also found its way to these parts as marauding youngsters reminded me gleefully every time I passed a school. Even more enticing, ancient Hindu cults practicing Vishnu worship were whispered about by village elders dressed in cheap jeans while they drank brutal

whiskey. But the great unspoken was the pre-Aryan belief that permeated remote tribes and barely visible landscapes.

My first couple of days traversing the criss-crossing slopes of the Siang valley and the Upper Siang region were spent recanting and synthesizing the vestiges of readings that wouldn't leave my mind despite my efforts to dismiss them, the more recent strands still working around my cannabinoid receptors and the dusty spaces in between. Skirting the corners of navigable land and looking back across the untouched mountains beyond the chewed corners of the inhabited areas, I'd pause from time to time to register the combinations flowing through me and the unreal natural beauty of the area before jumping back into my trek, invariably getting lost between all the delineations of where my thoughts ended and began. Gradually, the sparse feelings only illuminated at night by the watching stars started to wane, and I found myself in a head space different to at any other stage. I was simply being, with all of the mundanities of getting through a day barely registering as light melted into night. Despite the grabby protestations of the tribals I'd stayed with over the previous few days, I was ready to go beyond Pidyum, far from the river basins and into the realm of what I'd been told were the night tribes.

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"They are godless," I'd been warned by recently converted tribals with pure wildness in their eyes. "It's not safe up there," declared a postman who hadn't been within fifty miles of the area. "People have gone missing," a spanner-faced village elder told me. I imagined teenagers who'd heard a mangled Indian pop tune inspired to run in any which direction in search of the promise of removing the hierarchal yoke of their elders. I couldn't have been given a better set of references, and I waded into those malachite hills like a toddler having his first jaunt in a paddling pool. Now, I vaguely remember looking back at the distant villages in the river basin that had sustained me for the previous few days and thinking how regular they appeared, almost like the way I'd view another sprawling London suburb before ducking out of city life once again. It was only one night I spent beneath the canopy of bottle green trees, wide open to whatever creatures lived in the area. Early on

the second morning as I looked longingly at berries out of reach on a tree I couldn't identify, yet willing to take a chance whatever the consequences, a small wiry man with a broad face appeared and stared me down. He was neither aggressive nor unsure; he just kept on staring, waiting for me to make a move. I nodded slowly and held my hands out, palms up. He motioned with his head to follow him. Within twenty minutes, we had crossed a small ridge onto an adjacent mountain about two thousand metres high. Ten minutes later we'd entered his village.

A few heads rose from their morning work as I followed him through the narrow dirt track that joined all of the dwellings. The houses were made of some type of wood and mud combination, covered with dark straw thatch. The faces that popped out from them were copper in tone, peaceful in expression and economical in speech. I nodded and was usually met with a blank expression. I was later to find out that this was good—it meant I hadn't disturbed them. I also found out within a few days of staying in one of their low abodes, with a ceiling no more than four feet high, that they were far from godless. Their interpretation was firmly rooted in Nature and the source of everything that impacted them, both material and ephemeral. A lighter people would be almost impossible to meet, in both their beliefs and the ways these manifested in everyday living. They were closer to source in everything they did and thought. It was no wonder a dualistic urge to eliminate them existed all around the region. There's nothing worse for human pride than to have a living example around of the knowledge you'd gleaned from Nature and then presented as your own discovery or invention. Such things have always been unceremoniously obliterated by society.

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"That. England." I was struggling to fathom what Arkha was trying to say to me. He kept pointing to a triptych of mountains in the distance. "You go." It was the second time he'd said that. It didn't make sense to me that some superstition had led him to believe the big country in the distance was England. There was something else. I told myself that if he said it one more time, it was the third strike and I was out. Something didn't add up; Arkha's

people were way too intelligent and gracious to either think that was England or to banish a guest. The reality I'd been too obtuse to understand soon dawned on me.

The third time came and I went without any ill feeling. As I walked away with my bag slung over a shoulder, largely grateful for everything that had been revealed to me, I couldn't help feeling slightly rejected; the ego hangs in 'til the bitter end. The mountains turned out to be farther away than they'd seemed, a sweeping plain extending beyond what the horizon had promised. But it was perfect walking weather, and after a few days pottering around a way of life too advanced in its stasis for me to quite grasp I was happy to be walking again, especially with the crisp Himalayan air feeding my valves and doing its best to upgrade my thinking. As I finally got to the foot of the mountains Arkha had dubbed England, I looked back and was unable to discern his home from the wispy grey and amber clouds settling on the horizon. It took me until sunset to scale half of the first of the three adjoining peaks. They weren't that high, little more than three thousand feet, but I couldn't find a trail, or at least not one made by humans. My default suspicions of given directions began to play up, and I cursed Arkha. But just as I was about to quit and shimmy back down the slope to a recess I'd spotted earlier, I saw a ridge circling towards the second peak. I was on it within minutes. Looking up I copped the unmistakable opening of contours that was so attractive to humans, both aesthetically and strategically.

Before I had made it up to a shelf that butted onto the adjoining peak, I'd been spotted. Excitement soon unfolded and prior to actually seeing anybody, I knew others had been alerted. As I hauled myself towards the noise, head down and forcing my steps, prey to anybody who so chose to select me, I heard an English voice. "Please be here," he said clearly and calmly. I looked up and saw England in the shape of a tall, woolly haired man who looked tribal with a dash of Bengali. "Come. Welcome," he uttered. I nodded and flanked by the tribe's finest hunters marched into their domain.

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I was the centre of attention as a round of wood-coloured gruel was spooned into earthenware bowls, with the only woman who'd dare come close disinterestedly pushing the offering towards me. She waited with a distant look in her eyes while I gingerly put a spoonful towards my lips. It tasted like it looked but went down easily enough. I then heartily plunged my wooden spoon into the gruel and wolfed half of it down in no time before looking up and winking. She smiled, revealing an unusually symmetrical set of teeth. The grand puba of the tribe seemed happy with my commitment to the food, and my finder Mzuko nodded.

Apparently, religion had come to this tribe, first in the form of Taoism and Buddhism, then Shivaism and finally Christianity in the twentieth century, but all had been thrown off without much delay. Mzuko assured me that they liked them all, but did so in a way that reminded me of a weary Westerner assuming a positive bent about the latest cultural hit. The tribe had reverted to their original beliefs, and even though they seemed to contain more industry than Arkha's people they undoubtedly retained their unsullied interface with the world around them. Yet, there was something post-modern in their communication. Mzuko's English was rudimentary but more than ample to get across what he'd learned from his jaunts to Calcutta and trips elsewhere in his thoughts. And firmly but easily, he spent a lot of my time filling me in on what was really going on. I'm still not sure whether he was naturally insightful or if spending most of your free time dwelling on the slanted questions of existence led him to a lot more than entire fields and faculties in the developed world could arrive at. And I didn't know whether he wanted me to look over his ideas or simply act as the audience he couldn't find in the wilds of Arunachal, but he was always ready to get down. "Why do people in cities complain so much?" I remember him asking me. I was unsure if I felt relieved or cornered at being labelled a city man, but at least it was new.

"Complain about what?" I asked innocently.

"What is word... demonstrate?" he replied. "Yes, they seem to have so much but always demonstrate against government. Don't city people know that's a waste of time?"

"Well, it works sometimes," I responded.

"No, it doesn't. It never works, and that's probably good."

“Really?”

“Yes. If you want to change people’s minds, come up with an idea that can’t be killed.”

There were plenty of gems like that, all serving as knots to hold the states I’d already attained in Arunachal together in a natural pattern. “Fantasy is a great way to reality.” How’s he going to weave this into truth, I wondered. “The study of stars led to science; the quest for gold led to chemistry.” The bastard had been reading. I felt like I’d been cheated. “So, if you want to understand reality, you need more fantasy.” I was unable to verbalize how this couldn’t be right. “That’s why we like to stay close to our beginnings here. Every time some new religion or science was brought to us, it took us farther away from the real truth.”

“But that may not be true for other people.” I was hanging on for a draw.

“The source is in the gaps between all your modern habits. It may be out of sight, but it’s still in the mind.” He smiled after he dropped that one on me.

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As I walked out of those mountains back towards the lower hills of Arunachal, I couldn’t remove the image of source permeating the spaces out of sight of modern life. I’d been taken to the cleaners in those mountains by a couple of dudes who barely spoke my language but still seemed to do so at a way higher level than I could manage. I put the whole episode down to a self-correction; I was right, but not in any way I could have predicted. Arriving in Tezu on one of its few mistless days, I was still in a haze but determined to skirt around the inner borders of the province and skip into Nagaland without having to deal with any type of tired social interaction. So I was slightly taken aback when I saw a straggly haired, wan-faced European with the mercenary countenance of an Anglo-Saxon. I didn’t really want to get into it with him, but by the time I’d doubled around the other side of a parked truck and back towards the collection of converted army vehicles serving as taxis to try to map a route south, I heard his shout from behind. “Mate. Do you speak English?” I turned, and he was bearing down on me. I nodded in acknowledgement and

copped the dark saucers beneath and the reptilian distance in his eyes. “Have you been up in the hills?” he asked in a neutral accent, with some forced shared tone of brotherhood.

“Yeah?” I didn’t want what was coming.

“Did you see any plants?”

“I wasn’t really looking,” I lied. He turned and looked over his shoulder at me.

“I go to the roots of Nature for my medicine,” he declared. “Most people buy into the synthetic white-coated con game, but not me. Do you know about the history of this region?”

“Not really.”

“Well these mountains were where the greatest philosophical game in history played out.” I had images of some smacked-out tourist mixing metaphors and confusing various books to situate some great game in the wrong place with the wrong calling. “This is where the great religions all met, and not just once,” he continued. It sounded plausible. “I’m talking about thousands of years ago.”

“Sounds interesting.” I asked a local which taxi was heading towards Khonsa.

“Yes,” he continued. “Brahminism, Buddhism, Bon, Taoism and a lost tribe of Judea were all here at the same time.” Even in my most caned flights of fancy, I couldn’t bend time and distance to fit such neat premises. “Yes. There were philosophical hit squads roaming the area; and if you weren’t pure, you were fair game.”

“Any of them left?” I asked hopefully.

“Nah. Times have changed around here. Things aren’t the way they used to be.” He kicked a patch of dust and looked up at me ruefully as he shook his head. I was somehow simultaneously delighted and saddened that someone could travel so far and search so hard only to swallow an elephant of such size.

“Is it possible to change dollars around here?” I asked him.

“Nah, you need to get to the nearest railhead, Tinsukla. The ciggie kiosk on the platform will exchange—shitty rate mind you. Don’t forget to check the man with the foot. He’s always close by to the kiosk.” Before I could ask any more, he’d spun around and was chasing down a truck that was revving up in a final call.

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What I'd expected to be a bustling link via railway to the faraway markets of the subcontinent turned out to be a barely alive station, the type that trains would usually hurtle past. It seemed whatever bulk was left to unload at the easternmost point of the longest rail network in the world was done so back towards Guwahati and distributed through the ever-growing road network. This stretch of rail was dying before it had fully matured. Amazingly, even in this northern outpost, the station still seared in the path of a blaring Sun. As I walked onto the platform, with a ticket inspector eying me suspiciously, I looked around for any sign of business. There was little activity. The next train wasn't due to pass by for three or four hours, and that could easily mean the next day.

The kiosk was there, but nobody was inside. My choices were clear: wait or take a walk and come back and wait. I did both, four or five times. And it was only when I'd eventually found the first angles of serenity as the setting Sun fired rays through a stanchion on the edge of the platform, hitting my head as it lolled onto the base of the kiosk, that commerce commenced. Keys rattled and a displeased boss removed the boards from the front of his news agency. I wasn't in the mood for speaking. I simply held out a hundred-dollar bill, the last of my roll. "I will have to check the rate," he announced. A phone call later, followed by some measured punching of his calculator, he called out a number. As I turned and looked towards the train tracks with mock disbelief that I knew I wouldn't be able to sustain, I spotted the man with the foot on the opposite platform. It was a clubbed foot the likes of which I thought had died off with the last of the nineteenth-century freak shows. He was chasing two Israelis at a hilariously impressive clip, demanding the twenty rupees they'd apparently agreed upon for him showing them his money-maker. A roll of grey bandage straggled from around his ankle. I turned back to the kiosk and the money man was punching a new number into his calculator. I nodded, took some loose gold flake from his cigarette display and a bottle of water and signalled for the rupees. I needed to get back into the mountains.

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Hitching through Changlang into Khonsa, I was made aware of the larking around by Allied soldiers when they were on the Stillwell project. Before I could decide whether I was imagining things again, old men riding alongside me in open-backed truck taxis gargled words they were trawling up from memories of what had and hadn't happened. Some were of the wide-eyed at the free-acting foreigner variety, and some were of the sceptical at the motives of the so-called saviour type. While I was getting shunted around the back bench of the taxi, the potholes in the road sending ruthless shocks through my spine, I was being asked to bat away questions such as "Why are Westerners always cheating people?" When I suggested that Easterners might partake in a spot of swindling on occasion, I was met with growling disapproval. But just as quickly, I would be reminded by another wizened face of how some brotherly soldier doled out chocolate to youngsters for whom the whole war experience was one big escapade. "Always cheating, always stealing Asia," claimed another. "But they were kind to the children," decried someone else. "That was not real kindness," chimed in the obligatory government official.

"Don't forget the Brahmins. They came from the West too," I added. I got no response. The assembled travellers were now deep in argument, eagerly mapping their opposing views of Indian history. But before I could form any feelings of dismissal, I was transported to the labyrinthine machinations of people back home trying to feel good about their misguided opinions. The locals seemed almost honourable in their versions of right and wrong, fuelled by nothing but a need to rationalise the shit that had been poured on them for eons. They might have been comparable to bigots found everywhere but couldn't hold a candle to the sanctimonious lizards that socialize carefully while desperately trying to catch someone saying something that can be construed as prejudice so they can launch themselves up to the moral highground. The only thing I'd seen on the subcontinent to compare to them was those clowns clinging onto the misguided remains of the Raj through fake Englishness.

As I caught my final ride outside Namsang on the road to Longding, I encountered what would be the last local for a while who wanted me to hear what he had to say, and it was worth hearing. "People protect themselves through being cowards," he

informed me. “They just grow one part of knowledge, and they water it and protect it to make themselves feel like they are more than others.”

“You might be onto something,” I agreed as the driver told me to hop in the back.

“But it’s not real knowledge. It’s just a copy.” He kept staring at me as I nodded from the back of the truck. His eyes never left mine, even after we alighted and I looked back down the road I’d just walked. He stood still, watching me disappear into the distance, holding my gaze and the information within as if it was the last piece he was ever going to dispense.

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As I entered Mon, I realized I’d never felt a country so wide open. It was as if the inhabitants were daring outsiders to try their luck. I’d heard the stories of head-hunters but assumed they’d be hiding out in some isolated village. In the misguided security possessing the White Card had lent me, I thought I’d be able to power through any encounters with unwelcoming locals. But these thoughts were fleeting, and I was still tagging my breaths with images of mountain jumping as flashes of the markers I’d encountered so far swirled around the unrecognized areas of the brain.

I was ten miles into Nagaland before I came across a local, and I couldn’t believe I’d been so unlucky as to find a tattooed Konyak barrelling towards me. I was fucked if he decided to use his centuries-old technique to relieve me of my head. But as I came into his focus, he smiled broadly, the painted emerald creases in his neck tightening in delight. I nodded and smiled, admitting my lack of threat. A few moments of circling began, and he laughed again. He pointed towards the mountains in the distance, away from the widening river plains adjoining his land to Assam. “House, house,” he repeated, and with a darting movement of his hand he walked a few steps in that direction before turning back to look at me and then jab a stiffened hand in the direction of his home once more.

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## ***CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO***



It was four in the morning, a strong time to be dumped clueless in the outskirts of Bombay, but the driver wasn't interested in honouring his promise to take his last remaining customer all the way to the city centre. Seething, Landell marched down a darkened side street, aware of the piercing looks of late night hustlers alert to a ripe mark. He felt a primal surge as his eyes darted in all directions in search of a lit street, desperately warding off potential watchers. The shadows cast by the sparse pre-dawn light were unearthly. The whole area seemed to be creeping with danger. Landell could never have predicted he'd be so eager to get fucked by a heartless hotel owner.

After fifteen minutes of frantic searching yielded nothing, Landell realized he was walking a road he'd already been down. It wasn't the eyes from the shadows that alerted him, but a solitary out-of-order neon light indicating a downstairs bar. Hyped up, he tried to mentally go over his tracks. This time, he'd take it road by road, tagging each one as he went, starting from where the bus had dropped him off. Another thirty minutes yielded only two hotel sightings, both of which turned out to be fully occupied. Now near the end of his fuse, Landell staggered on. The sky was beginning to lighten, the eyes he thought he'd seen scoping him from doorways no longer existed. Veering off from a seedy area he'd tagged as laden with prostitutes and drug peddlers, he found himself on a non-descript road. There were no signs of residents or businesses, but there was one odd-looking guesthouse. Its wooden façade was almost elegant yet strangely disconcerting. As he pushed open the door and faced a steep flight of stairs, he could see the dust billowing around his feet. At the top of the stairs, a man draped over a desk barked "three-fifty" before Landell had said a word. "Check out twelve," he added, seemingly disgusted that a customer was arriving at

such a premium time. Landell posted the money, took the key and made his way to the room. It was neither the filthy bedding nor the ten-watt bulb casting the weirdest of glows that had him on edge. There was something else; even the horror of an addled being breaking into the room and knifing him seemed preferable to this overwhelming blanket being pulled over his head. He slept with his clothes on, and after the surly desk clerk bullied another hundred rupees out of him for overstaying his allotted time by ten minutes, he could still feel it as he stepped out into the blast of a Bombay afternoon.

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Landell walked down Marine Drive out of a sense of obligation but felt uneasy at its glassy shininess, even if it was skirted with grime. The passers-by were a fitting mix of dour-suited upper castes that populated the financial pulse of India, lungi-wearing street vendors and the wandering workless. The air's dusty creases had begun to filter through to his throat. Landell stopped at a kiosk, noting the mineral water was ten rupees costlier than standard; it was where India's attachment to recommended retail prices and buyers' indignation dissipated into the ether of a larger, more formidable intruder. There was something isolated and flimsy about this version of a city's city, yet it wasn't going anywhere. Like a small invading party that could have been eradicated without much effort if the locals rose out of their perennial torpor, it was already mapping the interior, fully trusting in new technology to secure whichever zone it decided to take aim at.

Standing on a promenade and looking out at a sea sold to industry, with an oily strand of beach in between threatening the soles of his shoes, Landell felt himself retuning to the anonymity of city life. But as his drift seeped into relaxation, he looked around with a paranoid squint. Determined to relax, he moved between a row of sickly palm trees, glancing to the western sea, the name of which he couldn't remember. As he

attempted to form a schooled thought, a white-suited man of about sixty sidled up to him, curling his lip before noticing Landell's button-downed shirt. "Are you English?" he asked shrilly. Despite being a couple of inches taller, Landell felt himself being looked down on. He examined the hackneyed warp of the man's face, his smart tie hanging onto something much older than a scraggly neck. "Are you here on business?" he added. A chrysalis of thought began to weld itself to Landell. He couldn't figure whether it was something deeper being suggested by the demanding tone. The dark face in front of him began to redden. From nowhere, he fell upon the idea it was a case of these types simply bullshitting with a thinly veiled tribal bent. "Introduce yourself," the man demanded.

Landell looked out to sea and saw a small ferry slowing up as it approached a pier. "I have to catch that boat."

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Landell filed in behind a row of Bombay's new rich, their haughty laughter concealing a genuine thrill at taking a boat trip in the Arabian Sea, even if it was only for a few hours. Detaching himself from the rush to secure a premium spot for photography, he loitered around the starboard side near the stern, in the shade and away from the majority of the twenty or so passengers who had the money and time to while away a Tuesday afternoon on what was billed on the ticket as "Cruise of the Most Arabian Ocean."

After checking all of the passengers' tickets twice, a suspicious inspector had a brief stand-off with a family of five who seemed to have purchased only four tickets. A few indignant shouts later, and a stubborn engine revved into action. Landell kept to the starboard side of the boat, absorbed in the rippled crescents of water moving away from its bilge. In them, he saw home and felt relief. When a sweep of failure occupied his chest, he reminded himself of all the writing he'd done and dismissed a lack of other progress through misguided concepts

of truth he'd readily identified, even if his dialectic abilities weren't strong enough to face off with believers. When the sun riffed a different angle across the waves, he assured himself there was something of value in what he'd encountered and that he'd return again—to the real places and not just along the paths of vapid searchers. With that, he tried to settle his mind with the notion there'd be some tangible gain from his trip. Anyway, he had almost finished the book and he'd be back in London the next day. Then, it would be his time.

Landell held up his ticket once more as out of the corner of his eye he spotted the inspector heading towards him, all the while keeping his gaze on the rippling waves being pushed away by the ship's swill. The inspector mouthing something inaudible over the creases in the water's surface that had Landell drifting with the flow failed to stir him. But a shrill tone denoting attention registered with him a split second before a sharp blast and a swirl of chemical burning overwhelmed his consciousness.

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"Hello."

"Sinclair. It's..." The line began to crackle.

"Who is this? I'm hanging up." Sinclair manoeuvred his chair towards his desk and lifted up a manila folder. Retrieving an empty box of cigarettes, he exhaled deeply.

"It's me." The line crackled again and the words came through in a disconnected roll: "okay, back, me, hear, Landell, you got to, tell."

"Listen. I'm hanging up now. I have nothing else to say about Landell Helms. I've already said everything that needs to be said. He was the most talented writer I've ever been associated with, and of course I'm not surprised in this surge of interest in his work. The whole affair is a tragedy, and I'm still numb. Now please give me some space to grieve in peace." The line went dead, and Sinclair picked up a newspaper, noting the buried location of the obituary he'd had published, ruefully

nodding at how easy it was once a writer was dead. "There you are," he whispered as a stray cigarette rolled from the newspaper into the middle of his desk. He lit it up, leaned back in his chair and sighed as the phone rang again.

"Sinclair. Don't hang up. It's me."

"Who is this? What type of sick joke do you think you're playing?"

"It's Landell. Can you hear me?"

"What... What happened?" Sinclair stubbed out his cigarette and scuttled closer to his desk. "You're dead, didn't you know."

"I've been dead to you for years, you prick."

"Jesus. How did you manage to survive? Only one survivor was found according to the reports back here. What in hell happened to you?"

"I guess I was sitting on the right side of the boat. The other survivor was probably the guy sitting closest to me."

"Well then... where have you been for the past ten days?"

"Some village I washed up at. A miracle is what they call it, I think. Anyway, I was totally out of it for the first week, drifting in and out of consciousness. My left arm is mangled pretty good, but I'm not too bad considering. I suppose I just hit a flow and ended up in the right place. Funny... I've been trying to do just that for years."

"Jesus." Sinclair stood up and looked towards his office door, making sure it was closed tight.

"Anyway, I only reached Bombay again yesterday."

"Get the hell out of there immediately; somebody might see you. You're supposed to be dead, and that's the way you need to stay... at least for a couple of months."

"What?"

"Haven't you seen a newspaper?"

"They take a week or two to get here." Landell looked around in time to see the telephone exchange boss swivel away as if he weren't listening to his sole customer's conversation.

“Do you really have no idea what’s being going on?” Landell began to put the pieces together. “Your passport was found. The embassy assumed you were dead.”

“Well, that’s convenient.” Landell checked over his shoulder for eavesdroppers.

“Have you got any money?” There was almost concern in Sinclair’s tone.

“Yeah, my wallet was the only thing I was left with, and some charred pants. I was going to the embassy in the morning to see about a temporary passport.”

“No. No. Don’t do that under any circumstances.”

“Why? I need to get home.”

“Listen, Landell. This is the best thing that’s ever happened to you. You’ve sold more books in the past week than you could have hoped to sell in the next five years. The papers are gushing over you, lauding your soon-to-be published magnum opus. You just need to lay low for a couple of months until we get it on the shelves.”

“Are you insane? Do you really expect to get away this? And what are you planning for me?”

“Listen, Landell. You wanted to be a writer; well, now you are one.”

“I already was one.”

“No, you weren’t. You were someone who wrote words on a page and that nobody gave a fuck about...” Landell was impressed that Sinclair was finally showing enough passion to swear. “Now, you’re a writer.”

“I’m coming home next week.”

“Okay. Just give me twenty-four hours. I’ll get a passport to you. Just sit tight and promise me you won’t go to the embassy.”

“This is insane.”

“That’s the spirit. You really are my favourite writer now. So, have you almost finished the book?”

“Nearly, it’s just... it’s a bit.” Landell noticed the phone’s metre whirring; it was getting out of control.



“Don’t worry about the ending. It’s supposed to be unfinished. That’s its major selling point. I’ve been whispering all over town about this masterpiece, from the Garrick to that awful Groucho place, planting seeds.”

“I’ll send you what I have, but it still feels clunky, almost instructional.”

“Every book is an instructional manual,” replied Sinclair. “I’ll take care of everything. Just give me the address of your hotel, and sit tight.” Landell exhaled and pulled the hotel card from his back pocket. “Just out of interest, was it terrorists?”

“Nah... a shitty engine.”

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## **CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE**



This place was very different yet felt exactly the way it should. As I shadowed my Konyak boss up a mountain trail overlooking the town of Mon, I felt that something was off about every other place I'd visited. Following him through the outskirts of his village, I realized I'd lucked out big time to run into this headhunter. After lapping the small settlement, I realized it wasn't the chief who'd brought me here, but rather some type of fixer. He provided odds and ends that appeared to be of great value to villagers trying to get through their daily tasks: metal clasps, batteries and instructions were met with glee. Techniques to alleviate the daily grind of survival were accepted with playful dismissiveness. And nobody seemed to give a fuck who I was.

"So, you've had a few Westerners staying with you," I enquired while gripping the end of a small tree trunk being hollowed out by the fixer.

"No." I didn't know if he'd understood the question.

"Hindu, Buddhist, white man. Come to here." I opened my face, awaiting a reply.

"You number one," he replied. With self-mocking pride, I shook my head, secretly hoping it was true.

As dusk began to fall, I walked to the edge of the settlement to catch the charred sunset before it slid out of view, spotting an angle to what looked like a small planted section of grass. As I approached it, I could just about make out that it'd been designed as such by an older member of the tribe, who stood by his creation, his tattoos fading but his eyes burning with excellence. I 'm hopeless with the names of plants; I try to memorize them by sight and the accompanying sounds whenever I come across them, but I'm pretty sure acacia and monkshood were there. The remainder were indigenous to the area, I was later to learn. I watched the keeper of the plants bend over, an orange and emerald back tattoo barely visible in the onsetting darkness as he scraped stems into a jar he was to leave out for the night. Everything he did was with care, precise yet relaxed. The fixer later wrote down the process for me, and I had it translated in Mon town. I may still have the

scrunched up piece of paper in a side pocket of my rucksack. What I do remember for sure was him saying he knew most of the jars would be attacked during the night by whichever animals were in the vicinity. The glass was nowhere near enough to conceal the DMT within. When I questioned the fixer why the old man would spend so much time carefully extracting such gold just to leave it outside for a thief in the night, he casually remarked that “they don’t care about our beliefs of having some control over plants and land.”

“But what about you and your people?” I asked.

“Why do you think people around here eat animals’ brains? It’s for the primal power they feel from the receptors of those very things being left out for them.” At least that’s how it was translated by a begrudging Hindu who’d set himself up as some sort of cultural attaché down in Mon town.

As I left his tiny office and began to walk towards the main street, deliberating over whether to take the next bus or cling to the last vestiges of planning still within me, I was walked down by a man who appeared half-Bengali and half-Konyak but could have as easily been someone who’d invested too much of himself in his target. “I hear you are a plant doctor,” he whispered.

“Not me. I’m just a tourist who likes pretty flowers.” I was still thinking about animal brains as his face morphed into something familiar.

“It’s okay. You don’t have to lie to me. I’m just like you.” This wasn’t the first time that a Main Street madman had given me the ‘you’re one of us’ routine. It was usually at such times I began to question my dismissal of people who obsessed over their image; maybe it was a good move. “You know why the English keep plants in their urban homes, don’t you?”

“Because they like them?”

“No. Well, yes,” he admitted. “But it’s not for the health benefits people talk about. They would only have a tiny effect in modern English cities. No, the real reason is for emotions...”

“Emotional health,” I suggested.

“No. The synthesis: If they can’t do it chemically, they’ll try it emotionally. Just to be around it... to trigger the ancient memories.” I walked away from him backwards, holding the palm of my right hand up, either out of respect or to tell him to pipe

down; I can't be sure anymore. But I do remember feeling that encounters were coming thick and fast, and I was trying my best to rush through them. It wasn't out of impatience or a sense of panic, more a rapid reeling off of the parameters of my thoughts and experiences before reaching a void. And it seemed the more I rushed, the thicker and faster they came. I knew I was coming to the end of the road as I hopped on a bus to Tuensang.

The ride was bumpy but punctuated with stretches of tarmac, recently laid but already breaking up. My overriding memory is of the greenness of the area, with criss-crossing mountains, ridges cut across each other and valleys almost meeting at impossible junctures. And there was the Sun, always on the brink of splitting the clouds. Beams got through occasionally, but more often than not it was darkened clouds backlit by fading gold above the rugged mountain terrain. Rain didn't usually last for long during the spring, and when it came it was quickly followed by fractured rainbows. The odd gaur pulling a trailer passed us on the fifty-mile trip between Mon and Tuensang. The man in the seat beside me, who kept holding two fingers up every time I squinted at the broken clock above the driver's head, seemed happy with our progress. I was too, with the rusting corrugated iron roofs of hillside dwellings adding to the beauty of the drive. For the first half of the ride, I was convinced I was heading deeper into uncharted territory as the lifestyles I glimpsed from my window seat hinted at a way little changed over hundreds of years. But the last few miles into Tuensang brought back signs of modernity, albeit more ragged than those in Mon. It wasn't until I got off at the last stop and continued walking a mile out of the town that I began to feel a change. I was heading down the only road in the area, but within a few miles it would abruptly end before continuing a couple of miles later. I wasn't to discover this until a few days later when I was walked to the roadhead by a fine-featured Sangtam in traditional hunting garb, smirking from time to time at my inability to navigate the mountain trails without checking my way every few minutes.

That initial walk out of Tuensang wasn't safe from the hurtling river of searchers determined to shoehorn knowledge into my laughable white head. The one who insisted on walking me to the end of the road was a part-time tribal and full-time government worker, he assured me. That didn't make me feel so comfortable,

but he was also into plants, or at least into talking about them, which was a relief. His questions were seemingly definitive statements, and his assertions were open to question. "You are not afraid," he stated.

"Of what?" I was busy envying his six-foot frame of solid teak. Even the creases in his neck looked spectacular.

"Headhunters are here." He laughed childishly.

"Well. They won't be interested in me." I'm not sure who I was trying to convince.

"You are right. It's better not be controlled by fear. Most of your people are controlled by fear and corporations. Here, the people let Nature guide them. Their plants help them to overcome fear."

"How does that work then?" His expression clicked as he changed mode.

"I believe the English word is pharmacopeia. They blend with your mind's natural elements to solve both physical and mental problems."

"Sounds good."

"Those medicines you Americans love are all coming from petrol."

"Really?"

"Oh yes, my friend. The real solution is in the plants. The spirit of alchemy is there, not in some silly tablet." With that, he left me to my own devices, apologizing for not walking me into the hills but providing me with a fairly comprehensive mental map of the villages and tribes to be found. He gave me his remaining cigarettes, claiming my one packet would be chewed up in no time. I watched him walk away before turning to the intertwining hills and valleys. By the time I located a trail, I'd almost forgotten the map.

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When I was welcomed into an Essak village, I got the feeling this was going to be one of those jobs where I'd have to tread the line between getting hosed and hurting the locals' feelings for having the audacity to not want to get ripped off. Within minutes, the guilt I felt at my initial prejudice had been disappeared by an angle behind some wooden shacks that led to a diamond-shaped

opening in a copse of trees fading into a mesh of navy and grey bramble. The village elder who'd invited me into his life just shook his head when I asked the twelve-year-old boy acting as an interpreter to explain what was there and why it was blanking my thoughts, faintly connecting me to something I'd seen months earlier but couldn't now visualize.

Somehow, the various swathes of proselytizers who'd swept through the area with stories of Buddha, Vishnu, Mohammed and Jesus—as well as those searching for lost tribes—had failed to dislodge the spectre of Shiva from the lives of the Essak. Whether this was through the strength of their connection or because one land shift and another had left them isolated enough from transit points that not even the most deluded of believers had the commitment to drag themselves into this shaded side of the mountains, I still don't know.

I thought I was being naively friendly when I asked my child interpreter, whose English had been learned at weekend classes in Kohima while staying at a cousin's house, to tell the elder I wanted to know why the Essak hadn't been brought into the fold when the Naga were asserting their self-determination. I watched as the old man went into a slow, unemotional explanation of why he wasn't wasting his time with negotiations, his tight brown skin providing a blank canvas for his expressive eyes. Halfway through his answer, he reached into a small leather pouch and retrieved a long wooden pipe. He inspected its bowl and, seemingly satisfied, filled it with a globe of opium mix before turning to a small fire at our feet and expertly retrieving a molten pebble with a pair of twigs; he deftly perched this on the pipe's bowl. Then he chugged smoothly until the globe had turned into a sphere of ash. The boy held an index finger over his lip in preparation for delivering words he didn't know the meaning of. "When has any king or business leader when questioned about their unfair actions admitted they were wrong and that things need to change? It never happens. That's why Shivaite cycles of destruction are necessary."

"Well," I replied.

"It's also beautiful," added the boy. I wasn't sure if that was his touch. The elder looked at me with a face brightly taut and eyelids slightly drooped. He was right: I had nothing for him. But he was cool about it and simply smiled and loaded up another pipe.

I realized it was time to show a bit of respect to smokers of the poppy. They knew how to throw down in more ways than one.

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The following night, after a day spent doing grunt work around the settlement as a way to show my appreciation, or a penance for my ignorance, the elder summoned me over to the fire again. There seemed to be something pressing that he wanted to speak about. Once more, the boy acted as a verbal go-between. But this communication was more abstract, and I'm not sure if I've added too much flesh to the words of the boy, but I seem to remember the elder looking at me more than usual, as if trying to circumvent verbal communication in order to get straight to the heart of the matter. It was, I'd been assured, all about how to fuse the physical area and activity around you with true quality. What I understood was that some pursuits appeared to have more quality because you were psychically connected to them. The rest was dressing from the remnants of ego that were gently expanding into the ether of my brain, the communication the brown-blissed eyes was directing at me or the boy's struggle with vocabulary.

Now it really was losing its hold over me. I smiled at its laughter, knowing that it was only a defence mechanism. That was when I realised I'd to go all out until the end—and that doing so would be the most serene of experiences. I'd loitered for long enough, physically put myself in the right places and now had to keep on. For a moment, I thought it wasn't shadowing me anymore; then I decided its reflection was in other people's actions.

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The next morning while I was being left at a roadhead by my taciturn guide, I felt a difference. Before, when I'd re-entered a track, wherever it may have been, I had the feeling of being back in the game. Sometimes I felt irritable; often, it came with a sense of relief. But this time, it was seamless; there was a great feeling of nothing. It wasn't irrelevance, but more a case of it being way less significant, a small ripple in a much wider expanse.

The walk down to Kiphire was almost anonymous, one or two wooden houses by the roadside signalling villages a mile or so inland towards higher mountains. They didn't reach any great heights, but Saramati stood out in bottle green splendour, sheaths of mist wafting over its peak. At that time of year, it lacked the snow cap which added to its striking beauty but still exuded presence, straddling the border between India and Myanmar, with some villages divided between the two nations. It seemed a much more likely source of life than the big hole back up the road, the site of the local creation myth, some type of temporary porthole for all living species to come to earth. I kept one eye on Saramati as I went undisturbed. It wasn't until the road widened into a space that could take a car that I realized I must be almost in Kiphire. Up ahead, I could see four or five short intersecting roads forming the town's centre. I scanned the scene and spotted an unlikely red and white painted wall with a door at one end. There was a small sign in a script I couldn't identify. I poked my head inside and was directed with a rigid thumb further up the road. Around a bend, I found a general store, the site of many dashed dreams on my trip. Scouring the shelves to see what I could lug around the border hills, the proprietor kept an eye on me, curious to my being there. I walked up to the counter and placed three packets of plain biscuits down, as well as a bag of what I hoped was cereal but suspected was millet, holding a finger up to signal I hadn't finished yet.

"American," he blurted as I crouched down to inspect the wares on a bottom shelf, still believing that the tastiest prey was always the most difficult to snag. I shook my head and kept on tracking the goods. "England." I nodded. "Good. It's easier to have real talk with English." I turned and raised an eyebrow. "I am from the hills," he continued. "My mother was from Burma side. My father worked for English and American troops during war. They were very kind. They paid for me to go to school in Kohima."

"Sounds good," I replied, gathering up a couple of dried fish and the last few samosas sitting on the counter.

"Are you going to the mountains?" I nodded and smiled.

"Ah, I am always stuck here."

"You can shut up shop and take a walk, no?"

"No. I couldn't do that. I am the only general store in the town."



"I see." I looked at his slightly pudgy face tighten to reveal the sharp handsomeness of a local tribal. He exhaled just as quickly.

"That is the problem with modern life; it doesn't pay to stay connected with Nature."

"Well, that's bad news." I felt like returning all my purchases.

"That's why most people get cut away from their natural link with Nature and its truth. They lose what they feel. If they remembered to keep this, they could have a sense of value and happiness even if they were poor."

"I think you might be right." I held his eyes for a few moments.

"But the modern way prevents them from doing like this. I see people becoming unhappy these days. It's sad."

"I thought people were living a traditional way around these parts."

"Not in this big town," he replied cryptically. "Not even in most of the villages anymore, but maybe one or two way up there." Dejected, he slung an arm towards the ceiling, intriguing me in the process.

I walked outside and noticed once more, even in a town with almost no action, that you see India not in the destinations but in the gaps: the truck stops, the forest dwellings that whizz by when looking out bus windows, the fleeting glances down ancient valley habitats. Running after India through slanted ideals of being away from the regular, hanging in the structured destinations next to but eons away from the source they aspire to, yields nothing. But inhaling charcoal around the edges of primal villages at night, slipping through mountain passes and hanging frozen by nadi insight are another matter, especially if you don't search for them but come to them through being there. I scrambled down from the road as soon as I saw a trail heading into the mountains. My only compass was Saramati and its web of myths that entangled the various tribes around the border area. A hundred yards into the vegetation, I felt like I was in the place, but as I began to become absorbed a shout rang out from behind me. "Remember. Language controls everything." It was the shopkeeper. He held up his hand and retreated out of sight. I turned back towards Saramati and deduced that then nothing must be controlled by non-language. I had direction.

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It was only when feeling the cleanness approaching that I realized I'd been ditching all modes of behaviour and socialization I subconsciously deemed worthless. I couldn't even trace back to when it had started, but the process was becoming more ruthless, culminating in a now when there seemed little to shed, or at least little I could identify. The corrections had become more instantaneous and less severe, but I was still okay with the idea of recalibrating whenever necessary.

I kept walking on, the flashes teasing me with the prospect of a more tangible conclusion. In moments of clarity, I knew it was a fool's errand to attempt to nail down what mystic monsters had realized after years of trying couldn't be collated with a few words or, even worse, a set of commands. It was that old trick of trying without trying, knowing without knowing. But that wasn't going to get through to the practical mind-set of the day, even if washed down with a palliative of sweet smelling herbs and mandatory tunes. It was crucial to come up with something concrete, a guide that wasn't a guide, or at least one absent of self-help claptrap. I excused the clunkiness of my conclusions with the promise I was still tweaking my mind, shaving edges and slaving over ledgers. So if you like it straight and know that the mental is served by the physical, then physically taking your body to the place and interfacing with the way that finds you, no matter how troublesome or banal, will allow you to receive. Put simply, that place is where Nature is, not where the travel-writing charlatans tell you to go. You need a point of connection, not a religion. The problem is that people always go for religion or some system pretending it's not one, but the point of connect could be anything, even a fucking lamp post. Just connect.

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As I opened the starving notebook I'd been threatening to write in, I responded to lack of output by consoling myself that I'd been busy loitering in the right places; not to mention all the storing I'd been doing. Putting it down on paper should have been the least of my worries. Anybody can do that.

I sat there in between everything and under a sky that would have been lit up by stars if it weren't for cloud cover. It was getting cold, and I wasn't sold on the idea of starting a fire. The alternative was to unfurl the insulated sheet of plastic I'd been carrying to keep any ground water off my sleeping bag. Beneath the shelter of forest, I lazily assumed my location between the roadside a few miles back and the remote villages up above would be away from the path of any wildlife. And I wasn't willing to acknowledge the stupidity of that idea. Anyway, I'd rather be taken while I was asleep. At least that was my initial thought before an image flashed through my mind of choking on lumps of plastic while a leopard mauled me but couldn't quite get the traction to finish me off. "Fuck it," I growled. I felt like a sensitive idiot who wanted to be part of an edgy joke but then felt wronged when harsh words were used. Words are just bullshit anyway, I concluded. I'd be better off knocking up a thinly veiled account of the storied life of my friends. "Ah fuck," I repeated as I pulled the plastic up to my shoulders, accepting I'd have to use my imagination, wherever that comes from. Nodes of thought and symbols of significance could combine to get me beyond the shoulders of those who went before me, I decided; and then, with a bit of luck, I could receive from the over-imagination.

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After years of wondering, I finally came to know how a trophy girlfriend feels. At first I felt like a selfish tourist, interloping between tribal villages, disingenuously spacing out the stays in each hamlet so as not to appear like a box-ticker. But it was all too easy, with hosts beyond eager to bring me to the neighbouring settlements for no apparent purpose. I started to get the feeling I was being brought to meetings that only happened once a year, then to ones that had never happened before. Gradually, I became indignant, wronged at the thought of my opinions being ignored even though I didn't have any. Unnerving as it was, I was getting by on my looks for the first time in my life. But just as soon as I'd realized this microcosm of a social dance playing out in the unlikeliest of places, its pattern started to disintegrate, revealing an underlay of randomness.

Retreating to a ridge a couple of hundred feet above the Ertoon village I'd been staying in, I looked down on the valleys below. From this vantage point, with its geographical overview of the area, I might be given some sort of clearance as to where to go next. Staring down on a collection of wooden roofs, with bits of scrap metal resting on the largest one, the obvious struck me. I turned and walked along the length of the ridge, scrambling up any rises to see if I could catch another view of the interlocking valleys. It wasn't until I had reached the end of the ridge, with its line running into a hillside which looked as if it had had its base scooped out from underneath it, that I caught a glimpse of what I was looking for. Deeper into the mountains, to the southeast, I spotted a gathering of no more than ten structures. The setting Sun revealed no glint of metal among them.

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When I witnessed a farmer working a steep patch of mountainside repeatedly cradling the back of his head with one hand while wafting his other arm panoramically, I thought that he was either illiterate or had suffered a brain injury. But once again, it was me struggling with putting it all together. With the help of his son, who'd carefully compiled in longhand a makeshift dictionary of the local dialect with Hindi and English translations, it turned out I was being advised not to wallow in smartness, nor look for safety in talent with language or a particular coolness in viewing the world. When I threw this back to the farmer and his suspiciously young son, they answered happily, relieved that I'd understood their point, even though I was checking if I really did. "All of these habits remove you from the primordial mind," was what the Hindi translation insisted. They simply shook their heads with nonplussed expressions when I started chuntering about the other people who dialectically misunderstood it. My pinpointing flakes' ignorance of flakes revealed my own limits.

The deeper I went into the mountains, the more irrefutable were the throwaway remarks I was hearing from locals. Though I felt something chaotic was underlying the ways and words of the people in the area, it came to me as a soother. And the more it came, the less I needed to tag thoughts or go over memories. About

a week in to wandering, not knowing whether I'd passed over the border into Myanmar, or even done so and doubled back into Nagaland while I navigated via the Sun and stars in stunning confusion, I met an ascetic. This was the first time I was sure it really was a wandering god-searcher; there was no other explanation for him being in so remote a place and heading to a peak that wasn't joined to any out. It was a trip of thanks he was taking, or a place of peace he was after. By his appearance, he seemed to be from the plains, of Aryan background. But in his face there was some meeting of non-statist Brahmanism with a more flowing mountain person. By the sheer relentlessness of his expression, it was a sure thing he'd speak English; something he'd picked up as a mental exercise on a chance encounter with foreigners somewhere. We walked together to the top of the blue-green peak, some three thousand metres high. Its draw was its position in the land, isolated from the other chains steering their ways through Himalayan foothills yet surprisingly difficult in its ascent. A trail appeared from time to time but was soon engrossed by plant life. The last five or six hundred metres were a hack, and the reward was a summit covered in trees and plants. There was no view except for that within the vegetation's cover. On the way up, he hadn't uttered a word to me. But after nodding twice following an hour contemplating at the summit—him on something I couldn't read, me on still trying to put it all together—I took it as a signal to descend. We did, and on the way he told me to only ever listen to the teacher who doesn't want to teach. When I asked him why, he said it was that type of teacher who was the best teacher. When I checked if he had any brown, he furrowed his brow and continued; he was serious. Many people study, he said, before doing something and then retiring from that thing to teach. But some keep on searching and evolving, rarely coming back to teach: these are the real teachers.

When we parted, him back towards the roadhead, me southeast towards Manipur, he pointed to a mountain barely visible through strata of cloud and mist. "The mountain will provide you with everything," he claimed. As I walked on, I cursed myself for not checking whether he was talking about that particular mountain or the concept. But I thought deep and hard about it as I beat the ferns down with my calloused feet: water, weed, ideas, food and

illumination. No wonder they were treated as sacred around these parts.

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As I slowly crested another shift in the alder-covered hills, I began to feel a noticeable difference. This wasn't the foothills of the Himalaya anymore: the air was wrong. It had the fuggy weight of sub-tropical climes. From my crude navigation, I was pretty sure I was close to the south-eastern corner of Nagaland. The hills were covered in green but lacked the lushness of further north. It was the type of latitude where you'd expect trucks to trundle by off-road on some ungodly construction project, but there was nothing except dead silence. As the ridge I'd been walking along began to drop, the interlocking valleys suddenly opened, and before me was a decent-sized lake in the shape of a foot. I quickened my step and began to bound, filled with the energy of a lost soul who'd been clinging onto life by the fingertips even though I'd eaten quite well that morning. It wasn't exactly an azure droplet surrounded by verdant hills; more of a navy sheet penned in by warm green vegetation. But its silence was startling.

Why nobody had staked a claim to this water in such an arid stretch was beyond me. It was only while doing the backstroke, kicking manically to keep myself afloat, that I realized it might be a sacred spot. I sheepishly side-stroked back to shore; I must have felt I'd been seen. Weeks in deep mountains tune your senses in a way that years of meditation can't. I'd dried off and dressed by the time the young boy showed himself, holding a fishing line and a small wicker basket. Relieved I hadn't breached an untouchable spot, I smiled and winked, walking away in an easterly direction as soon as I spotted a dirt road trickling westwards down the side of the opposite mountain; it must have been a link to the main north-south road linking Phek to Kiphire. Instead, I walked back into the hills to pay my respects to Mol Len.

I thought I'd retired from the mountain game when I dropped down into Nagaland, but soaring above the border with Burma, Mol Len was making me think again. Traces of snow were still visible on its summit, about nine thousand feet high. But as I approached it, there was no urge to ascend; I'd assumed I would

just go on automatic pilot and begin scaling as soon as I hit its circumference. Looking up, I felt strangely hollow: It was as natural to nod and let its role in the area as a source of the practical and divine flit through me before passing on. In a moment of pre-thought, I realized it wasn't always about climbing to the top of the highest peaks, where you will be surrounded by higher peaks to ascend. Sometimes, it's about lurking in the lower hills surrounding the higher peaks, checking angles and parallax slants showing the in-between and the gold within.

Following a dry river bed, I cut between uninhabited hills with no definite destination but far from rudderless. The only thing better than a plan is no plan, I decided. All I needed was a jump off to get all the way back to the source, and the source of that source. Only then, could I take the leap forward I was dwelling on. It couldn't be the usual conveniently attractive point, as in images of perfectly contemporary goddess or queen figures, nor could it be the watertight spectre of an orgy to sate a lazy conception of how it all began. I needed to be at the end of the Earth, around the source, between the lines and loitering aimlessly all at once.

Winding through Chingai, the dry valley led me to Khullen and a roadhead. It was as close to the eastern border as navigable routes got in India; it had the air of a road to nowhere. As I planted my feet on its gravelly asphalt and took a few steps, my movement felt wrong. I needed to get back into the forest as soon as I could pick up some provisions. And though my brain was telling me I didn't want to interface with the blocky realm of commerce, my mind wasn't there. I barely remember the roadside truck-stop where I force-fed myself two plates of rice and dhal; my stomach wasn't equipped to deal with such assaults anymore. I must have bought up all the samosas and dry goods they had in stock.

The only other thing I remember from my detour into the flow of human traffic was a Bengali who insisted he was Australian. Maybe he was, but a couple of weeks without a smoke will make things hazy. I recall shrugging as he told me his father was an Indian guru who had settled in Sydney. He seemed very keen to convince me, but just as suddenly would dismiss it all casually while recounting his work leading groups of Western students in Goa. And there was something else: a story about how hardened Westerners had laughed at his father's discourse on something

empty being full of nothing, and therefore full. He, as a teenager, had also smirked at it. But now, as he explained, it was irrefutable. I might have believed him if it weren't for his careful self-promotion, from his stilted speech to his diamond stud earring. "An empty room is full. Full of nothing," he declared. "And, therefore, nothing is empty." There was more; thankfully it didn't stick. But as I dropped down into the scrub at the side of the road at the first sign of an opening, much to his bemusement, I realised there was something in it all. Between the lines, there was something different about this world. It wasn't the crass claims of anything being possible in India, or the misguided attempts of people to find a source where it had been all but eradicated. Maybe it was simply in the words and the possibilities woven by them.

I walked with direction through valleys in Manipur I had no knowledge of, allowing the traces of my trek through Arunachal and Nagaland to slowly dissipate as I dwelled in the blissed-out streams of previous decades that I couldn't remove from the core. From keys I'd always known to riffs, so simple yet indelible, they crept around my almost emptied-out memory banks. And when I was unable to feed one into another, seamless breaks joined them in a way I couldn't dream up alone. They remained after bouts of meditation so vivid I was pouring with sweat in cold starlit nights under sparse canopies. Even when the slight fear connected to the rush of seeing through other eyes, not as if they were my own but because in that real time they were mine... when the him in him, and the her in her, was the same as the me in me. Then, I had to either let it take me to the end or, having absorbed all the jewels I could find, be ready to descend from my mountain bliss.

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## ***CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR***



Landell didn't want to take any unnecessary chances, settling on a local bus to a district neighbouring Bombay Airport. From there, it was just one more auto-rickshaw ride. He tried to ignore the feeling that he was leaving himself wide open. Anyway, what tourist takes a rickshaw to the airport? And the driver would be living in a different universe.

Struggling to make his way through the melange of bodies, Landell held his left arm tight to his chest, its greying sling beginning to loosen. Once off the bus, he balked at the melee forming around the side of the road. Passengers in transit negotiated street vendors hawking snacks and good luck charms. Landell raised his head in search of a landmark. There was nothing to hang on; he could've been anywhere in urban India. Inhaling deeply, he smoothly took in the charcoal and rested his eyes on a lone auto-rickshaw. Without striking a deal, he swung his rucksack into the back seat and wedged his body in beside it. "Airport," he shouted.

"Mmm," replied the driver, turning to reveal a broad forehead with a flattened nose, his skin taking on a mulatto tinge under flickering street lights.

"Airport," Landell repeated.

"Oh yeah," came the reply in a deep bass. The driver revved the throttle and turned the auto-rickshaw in a semi-circle with his knees bent outwards, forming an ungainly butterfly shape. "Awww," he moaned before taking his place in the traffic. As soon as he navigated the small chowk where he'd picked up his passenger, he hung right into a dark and quiet road, unnerving Landell. The heavy air of suburban Bombay was beginning to blend with the burning smell of the vestiges of rural India in the area. "We take this road; quiet road," proclaimed the driver. Landell nodded and began to think of a new life in London. "We put the hand on the steel and the road can feel the

wheel... oh yeah," the driver sang as he sped forward for fifty yards of smooth tarmac before slowing down as the rickshaw trundled over a bone crunching speed bump.

"How long will it take?" shouted Landell, the wind blowing his words back to him.

"This time will go like any other time. Lay back and enjoy trip, brother; mmm."

"I'm going to be late for my plane."

"No worry brother. Your plane just arrived. I saw it come down twenty minutes ago. We have enough time. You like airport life more than talking to your brother in the fresh night air?"

"I suppose not." Landell exhaled as the driver hummed blissfully. It was only fifteen minutes of bumpy road spliced with humorous moans and knowing "yeahs" before Landell spotted runway lights in the distance.

The insects were coming thick and fast now, but the cool wind alleviated any irritation and the words of the driver began to lodge in his passenger's brain. "Things are getting better my friend, but we are losing good things... yeah."

"I know," replied Landell.

"You don't gain anything without losing something." The driver laughed before humming pensively. "But I still see things that remind me of old times."

"Really?"

"Oh yeah... every day. That is why I keep driving rickshaw. I see things when I don't expect."

"Where?"

"Anywhere, but usually in the places that haven't been changed yet: the old neighbourhoods, the bits of road they haven't developed, the dying buildings."

"What about the modern areas?" asked Landell, crouching forward.

"Oh yeah, there too. But it's hard to catch those ones. I don't know if they're dying or if they just hide better." The driver made a wide circle before coming to a halt at the entrance to

the airport car park. "They'll make me pay big baksheesh if I drive you all the way up."

"That's okay. I can walk."

"What about arm. I will carry your bag, brother."

"No need. Take care." Landell handed the remainder of his notes to the driver before peeling a hundred back. "I have to make a phone call." The driver smiled, humming all the while.

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"Where are you?" The voice was frantic.

"I'm at the gate. My plane's about to leave."

"Okay." Sinclair sighed. "Don't worry about anything. The passport won't fail. There'll be someone to meet you at Heathrow. Just make sure you're wearing sunglasses when you come out into arrivals."

"And then?"

"I've got a nice place arranged for you; a friend of mine is away for a while. A few months lying low and then we'll spring you."

"A few months... no way."

"Listen Landell, please. Just do this for me. You will be able to relax there; it's a nice place. You can polish up the last couple of chapters you've promised me. I've already got a serialisation deal with *The Observer*. I promise you we're going to take this to the next level. As soon as the lull hits, then you can come back to life."

"Sinclair, I'm running out of money here. Anyway, do you expect people to believe I've just magically reappeared out of nowhere?"

"Please Landell, let me do my job."

"I'll talk to you when I get back." Landell let his shoulder drop, allowing the receiver to hang loose.

"No. We cannot meet; we can't even phone each other. But don't worry. I'm going to arrange a press conference with a Pakistani friend of mine; he's a major mover in Karachi. He'll

explain how you were washed up along the Rann of Kutch and nursed back to health by illiterate villagers. It's perfect: you'll get another book out of that story."

As he left the midnight air behind him, ascending the steps onto the airplane, Landell felt some primal surge feeding up his spine. One final glance over his shoulder to the muggy Bombay night left him with a fractured Eastern bent, a promise to relay some deeper meaning hanging on the relief of removing his body from the madness of navigating India. Inside, a sinking feeling began to form. He was disconsolate by the time he'd located his seat. Sitting down and staring at the back of the headrest in front of him, he wondered what he'd be left with.

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"Everything okay? I'll have some provisions sent around later. I've got a nice bottle of scotch here with your name on it. And remember, you can phone Tony any time you need something. He'll arrange everything."

"Enjoy this while you can, Sinclair. The days of publishers and agents telling writers what to do are coming to an end." Landell looked around at a cluttered apartment, a lack of habitation evident in the dusty loneliness of the wardrobes and plush yearning of an antique table and chairs wedged against the living room wall.

"That's the spirit. Back on that old self-publishing tip again; writers have been hanging onto that dream for centuries."

"Things are different now," declared Landell, projecting the power of his confinement.

"Do you really think those in control have ever voluntarily relinquished power just because it's the fair thing to do?" The phone line went dead.

Landell lazily tucked his flapping shirt into his jeans, and when it started to work its way free again he sighed. He looked towards the dim light emanating from behind a giant

lampshade, its dark brown material casting a morose glow over the sitting room. Once again, he psyched himself up for a search. He knew for sure he'd had it in his hand before the oven alarm rang out earlier. But in his panic to shut off the noise, he couldn't remember where he'd put down the wrap. It housed the only piece of excitement available to him. "Why am I hiding in my hiding place?" Landell blurted. Being sequestered was enough. There was no need to pretend that nobody was living there... so long as he wasn't identified. Silently, he turned over scraps of paper torn from a jotter and lifted newspapers left on the ground, retracing his steps. He'd spent the best part of the afternoon going through the same ceremony to no avail.

Standing at the entrance to a small hallway leading to the front door, Landell looked back towards the kitchenette and slowly rotated his head, taking in the full scope of his eye line. The bookshelf was staring at him, but he couldn't see anything. Slowly he approached it, and gradually the unlikely butterfly wings of a paper wrap came into view, carefully perched on the spine of a Gide novel he knew he was supposed to have read. Opening the wrap, he dabbed his little finger into the small hill of white and slid it up his nostril, slovenly admonishing himself for regressing to the habits of those literati hacks he'd slammed at every opportunity before going on his journey. He quickly reminded himself that there wasn't any shame in enjoying the spoils of posthumous fame. None of it made any sense, and casting an eye around the West End flat he once would have scorned, he recognized the vestiges of old sets that had been the source of many styles and tastes which were now so tired. But they remained because they must hold some value, he admitted to himself. Sunbeams flooding through an expertly designed night light added a sparsely beautiful ochre light to his conclusion.

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Landell awoke on the couch, his neck ricked from hours of frantic sleep. The first thing he saw was the bookcase, its amber and bronze hues deflecting the earthen colours of the novels he'd promised himself he would get through during his confinement. But the bottle green and grey couch he lifted himself from was every bit as part of what he needed as the artefacts within the walls housing him. Looking around blearily, he was at once satisfied with his arrival, however transient it may be, and dulled by its attendant emptiness.

Crouching before dropping backwards, Landell let the one bare wall in the apartment support his weight. He looked to the far corner of the dimly lit room and the writing desk Sinclair had sworn was once the conduit of Mortimer's words before he'd fled to Spain to avoid the taxman. Between the candlelight and burgundy leather casing behind the desk, an unlikely purple glow hung over his loose-leafed final chapter, shifting from moment to moment and edging Landell out of his addled haze and back through Sinclair's words: sales had been boosted, and his contemporaries had scrambled to cite his influence on them; it was a tragic loss, a writer's writer. But there was none of him in their works; not because of a difficulty of replication in the way some artists can never be copied despite their influence. There was nothing because there had been no inspiration. It was just another death dash, more insurance and a sway to the big movement than anything else. And even that would sink without trace within a few months. Landell felt contentedly hollow at his official disappearance. It was a mirror of a more real removal, and that prospect felt better the closer he got to it.

Slowly, Landell walked towards steps leading to a mezzanine, where a double bed promised relief. The hue of the wooden bannisters had begun to darken from the crisp beige he'd seen on his first day there. His head flicked backwards towards the desk, and his closing eyes could only produce an outline. The rush of blood that accompanied his ascent began to block out the number of steps he was trying to tick off before he could sleep it all off. As he pressed down hard on the second

step from the top, that mundane surge of force he'd always casually dismissed as a precursor to correcting his balance was for once married to a numb splintering of thoughts, gently pushing him into freefall. Lying at the bottom of the stairs, his neck contorted, a hollow hiss emitted from Landell's mouth, a final deep reach for infinity as helical strings passed through his mind.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Sinclair locked his office door and unplugged the telephone cord from its socket. A recently acquired water-colour hung conspicuously behind his desk. Sitting down, he sniffed at the smell of varnish still hanging in the air days after the workmen had left. Once again, he reached for the pages that had been found on the bookcase overlooking the corpse while cursing himself for never having taken the time to learn the basics of editing. "I probably won't be able to make head nor tail of this mess," he whispered. "How to cobble this stream of self-indulgent twaddle into a presentable package." He stepped away from his desk before approaching it again, breathing deeply, hoping oxygen would prove a worthy substitute for knowledge. "You silly shit, Landell. You were just weeks away from going through the roof." Sinclair sat down again, reached back to close a window, and lit up a cigar. He poured a quadruple from a bottle of scotch he'd been saving for a special occasion and picked up the skeleton of the last two chapters. At the top of the first page in orange felt-tip pen was a note from the author: *how to explain this with no fat? I only seem to know the complicated way; maybe I'm a writer after all.*

The two things I carried down with me from the hills criss-crossing Manipur and Nagaland were fading images still weighing heavy on my mind: Living in balance with the plant world was a necessity as it was your best shot before the plants lost their cool and eliminated you; and the greatest religion of all was the original one, all the way back to the first driver of man, the female source of it all, still wondrous, magnetic and life-giving.

By the time I'd hitched down to the foothills around Shillong, I noticed the edges being shorn from the freedom of children at play. The simple equation of no rules equalling freedom, which in turn equated to happiness, was being fractured by the creeping clamp of organization. When I saw two Europeans ecstatic at attracting the attention of a group of youngsters playing an



oblique stone-kicking game, the happiness reeked. The visitors seemed to be faking freedom, altogether more controlled than ruffians who broke rules without purpose just for a quick jolt of the ultimate high. My ruminations quickly became trails of the memories I'd left behind in the mountains, their energy fuelled by seemingly unconnected flashes of Shiva lingha dispersed among long-forgotten cultures. As soon as an image was about to crystallize, it would become another trail. And as those thoughts tiptoed around my subconscious outside Shillong, I accepted how lucky I was to get to witness the first stage of tourists fucking a way of life: The owners of two guesthouses that made up the travellers' quarter were facing off, each with a machete in hand. I edged closer until I was up to the wall of people who'd rapidly assembled to view the standoff. The machete-wielders were spitting fire at each other, remonstrating over a Swedish couple whose English was struggling under the welter of invective. Just when I was convinced that the high-armed threats were for once going to be acted upon, the Swedish woman shrieked that they'd take a room in each guesthouse. With that, the duellists abruptly simmered down and were soon cackling like carnies for outsmarting people who'd already quit.

I passed on by, deciding that thirty minutes walking through Shillong while staring at gathering clouds readying to dump a deluge on this famously rainy spot was all the respect I was required to give. Cutting through a side street running adjacent to the main market place, I was met with a familiar sight: the tatty shop-fronts of a chowk. The scene was dreary yet threatening, a blot on the surrounding verdant hills. I kept on walking, head down and ignoring any hawkers, until I merged with a busy road. By then, I was already out of the town and bearing down on a biggish lake. Taxis and remodelled jeeps buzzed by, but it wasn't until one stopped right beside me to pick up a scrawny old man that I heard the driver confirming the place name 'Guwahati.' I hollered and before catching my breath was jammed in amongst the splayed feet of a jeepful of locals.

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Before you leave the subcontinent, you'd be a fool not to squeeze in one epic train journey, and just as big a fool to take in more than one. There's something that happens after two nights on a train trip through India that's quite different to an over-nighter. Once you wake up on Day Three in second or third class, all bets are off. It's not just the experience of witnessing snake charmers, transsexuals and the usual retinue of Indian chancers; there's also a deeper test that sorts the wheat from the chaff. A beauty exists in watching a big-game talking world traveller crack after waking up for the second time aboard the madness of an Indian train. It usually happens when he takes a bleary-eyed walk to the toilet to splash some water on his face, but by then it's too late. All services on the train are null and void. Your only hope is to have reserved an upper bunk, battened down with enough dry food and water to see you through to your destination; otherwise, you're fucked. If the swaying swill of the aisles doesn't get you, a simple conversation starter will take an odd step through your synapses and you'll soon be lurching around a white hot platform gasping for oxygen, not knowing that you've got off in a place that will be a nightmare to get back on track from. That's what I was slyly watching from my upper bunk through the gaps between window grills, the feeling of having betrayed a fellow European when he needed someone most quickly swept away by the rudderless line of the train.

The European's declared nonchalance had died a sorry death on the third day of the journey but was still trailing in my mind when a narrow-faced older man in the lower bunk, who hadn't said a word in two days, suddenly opened up. "It's important not to forget that the real people keep quiet, operate in silence," he announced. I looked down at him looking up and winked. "I'm not talking about myself," he added before pausing and adding "necessarily." He had the appearance of an ascetic who'd thrown on a padded jacket and traditional headwear for an impromptu hunting expedition. "And they have done so for thousands of years." As a wave of desperation swept over me, he added "there are still good people out there." I peered out at the platform one more time before it disappeared and the faded green countryside took over. "It's normal for Westerners to support their governments." I remained silent, hoping he might include me with the real people. I was content enough that he hadn't yet accused me

of supporting my government in the way that most philosophising train riders had done so far. "That's because they are babies. They've signed over their understanding of reality to a bunch of charlatans for security." I widened my eyes in mock agreement. I was really trying to slow him down, in need of a smoke to process the speed he hurtled through information. "I suppose it makes sense they support capitalism and its fake wars." I wasn't sure what he meant, but I was delighted he'd said 'they'. "Do you want to change it?" I nodded, maintaining my silence. "You got to have people know reality and never sell it for a house or medical insurance. What use are those when you've got no soul?" I protruded my jaw and nodded slowly. Within twenty minutes he'd gone. There was no ceremony, nor inconsiderate shuffling of his co-travellers baggage in the usual manner of obsessive-compulsive checkers. He simply looked at me sideways and nodded. I suppose he knew that such an exit would leave a way more powerful mark. Whether it was from awe of me being at the level to converse with a real one or from some simmering threat they were trying to exude now that I was alone, the eyes of my immediate neighbours stayed glued to me until I broke my motionless pose after another twenty minutes and gently rocked backwards into the foetal position. I was out within seconds.

When she appeared before me again, I was stunned but automatically accepting. She didn't sit or stand, but was there, directly in front of my thoughts and vision. I remember talking to her about the new face of love in a sleep perforated with loneliness. She smiled softly as I went on what I thought was a revealing commentary but was more like a pontificating rant about the vagueness of the commitment in modern unions. The assumed coolness to deal with the true depths of that vital feeling, the symbols and language used to obfuscate and occasionally reveal. "You know what it's like." I showed my hand in a moment of weakness. "When you don't truly care about a woman, all those levels of passion become much easier. So, what's the answer?"

"You want to be a player, but you want to care. Where do those feelings merge?" Her smile hadn't flinched, her wisdom constant.

"And then the ones you can really get lost in always contain one impenetrable angle," I added.

“You need to be careful about falling for cool women with honeyed looks. They’ll drag you into deep waters,” she replied.

And they were the last words I remember hearing from her, though I didn’t notice her lips moving. Fifteen years of avoiding, not being broken, disseminating all the fake crap of relationships only to be undone by one smile. The One will break you with a smile. Where with her it was different: everything almost there bar those few unfathomable elements that prevent something so beautiful from coming to pass even when major mental clefts still permit marriages to trundle on without any objections. That seems so wrong, if somewhat human in its sadness. And as her face slowly receded into the frail golden light, I dwelled on my slowly dissipating thoughts, holding onto what nearly was, the sentient union betrayed by one wrong move, or look, and unlocking before hurtling into infinity. I wondered if the emptiness of that moment was the union of sex and death I’d promised myself I would look into when I had the time. And then I was only left with the overwhelming pain of psychic separation, the worst kind of disconnection. I consoled myself with the thought that I was unlikely to have to traverse this wasteland of promise for another ten years or more. Anyway, I walked well in winter. And as her image faded away, I was left with the cool goodbye of eternal warmth, blessed to experience beauty as mind.

I came to as the train began to slow down before stuttering to a halt. My first instinct was that we’d run out of track. Automatically, I prayed for a one-hour cow crossing, hedging my pessimism, before looking around the carriage. Some whiteys I hadn’t noticed before were busy craning their necks out of a window, happily snapping. I watched with bemusement, zoning out as they frantically scrambled to find a view of what was happening from behind a lens. And there was definitely that old feeling of sticking, or being stuck, the first time it had delved so deep inside me, demanding a solution. Scanning the scene, there was mounting desperation among the snappers to capture an ever-decreasing number of quality occurrences. But that couldn’t be right, I thought: it wasn’t that quality flows were fewer in number but that people were connecting with them less... and then the misguided attempts to capture them for posterity. Still, I didn’t want to believe what I’d just realized and knew I’d be toasted for suggesting to

anyone that if they just let those moments of true quality meet them naturally there'd be no need to record them. I wasn't sure anymore who was the madman clinging to a single strand of sense in an endless rant.

Flat on my back on the upper bunk, the pressure around my lower legs increasing as I interlocked them in an inverted cradle, I allowed my head to balance against the edge of the padding, guilty of a somewhat clumsy attempt to synthesize memories of Nature with pineal blasts in the shape of a contorted meditative pose, all in the name of accessing a blissfully breathless phase of mountain jumping. As the memories dissolved, stars were what held sway over my consciousness in the deep navy skies of those inland areas free of any light pollution, the perfect place to keep ancient streams alive. And I held that position until the pain in the small of my back threatened to bulge out of control. Then I rolled and sat up, once again to be locked onto by a pair of eyes waiting for battle. "You have come here to find the true God."

"Oh fuck," I whispered. I thought I was done dealing with randoms insulting me in this bizarre question form. Silence wasn't going to be condoned.

"You have been travelling with us for a long time now. You must introduce yourself." It was the first time I'd laid eyes on him. It was also the first time that being told what I must do didn't register even a twinge of anger. "You are looking for God in India. You are a foolish tourist." This was more than I'd expected. I think I was reaping the seeds sown by an earlier passenger. "India is the biggest democracy in the world. Superstitious people believe in this god or that spirit, but it is all trickery. Either they trick themselves or are tricked by others. And you stupid tourists come here because you are sick and tired of your God and think our one will save you."

"Our god," I repeated.

"Yes, even if I know better than to believe."

"Believe," I repeated. His proud moustache began to twitch belligerently.

"It is all a matter of controlling simpletons. What do you believe in?" he demanded.

"Nothing," I replied.

"Ah, so you're the same as me."

“No. You don’t believe in anything, but I believe in nothing.”

“It’s the same thing. You are being ridiculous.” He took a step backwards; now my resting head was side-on to his inquisition.

“In nothing, quality can lie dormant and then be sparked by one person and, like a rolling avalanche, gather unreal force in a short period of time, spanning continents and generations.”

“What?”

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I jumped off in the strangely silent station of Gopalganj. There was a lot more going on here than a march around its few streets would first suggest. In the distance, three lonely hills overlooked an undulating plain, a last sorry goodbye to the Himalaya. I’d heard of this town mentioned in passing, not by those who wanted to be heard disseminating stories of some cool place but rather in hushed tones, in tales of friends who’d gone AWOL or drifted to some cut-off limbo where they could get out of the tourist drug game but still hold a despairing hand out to an India slipping away.

Walking away from the hustle that pervades most stations, I headed in the direction of the closest hill, guessing that there would be some type of guesthouse with a view, but I’d been spotted. Whether the long-termers hung out in strategically positioned dhabas or a first-timer arriving was as conspicuous as a pasty-skinned tourist trying to look experienced on his first day in Delhi, I wasn’t sure. Regardless, he came right up to me, his guttural English inflected with bug-eyed wonder at how I’d found this place, innocent Mediterranean tones underpinning his attempts to prise some information from me. When I said I was just taking a pit stop on my way to Calcutta, it seemed to trigger something conspiratorial within him. He needed to tell me what was happening in the big picture, unfortunately. “Searchers are being taken from their governments first and their dealers second,” he announced.

“You mean freedom searchers,” I replied, flashing my eyes at him.

“Yes. I knew you’d know. They have lost their natural high; the freedom of Nature has been taken from them and they haven’t even noticed.”

“Are any of them staying here?” I asked, angling for a hook up. I’d been smokeless for weeks.

“No... no, my friend. A few years ago maybe, but these new blow-ins are not true searchers. They just want to talk.”

“Where are they staying?” He knew I wasn’t going to dance with him for much longer.

“You don’t want to go there. Anyway, I’m not welcome anymore, so I can’t take you. I told them the truth, you see.”

“You should know better than to insult somebody with your understanding of reality.” He stared at me as if he were about to burst into tears. “I’m looking for someone. It’s important. I think he’s there.” He sighed and flung his arm towards the nearest hill, saying he’d walk me some of the way.

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It truly was a halfway house, in between every condition and angle I’d witnessed in the Indian dream. On the surface, it was a stop-gap for smackies and nut jobs, situated between the mountains and the city in geography and the ceremony of smoking. It seemed to be a location for people to talk about where they were heading, both metaphysically and in reality, as well as where they’d been; something between a place to relax and take stock and somewhere to get your story down before you moved on. A few of the guests talked about climbing all three of the hills visible from the rooftop terrace; others talked of the way it used to be—the treks, the old guests, the beginnings of the scene before it had been commoditised. But in those farthest gone, whether from brown or, even worse, from being jolted into a foreign place in their minds, I found the remains of the coolest and humblest people I’d met on my way. Such loons were enough to almost restore my faith in Westerners.

A boy led me to the last room on the first floor, a ten by five cell with just enough room for a bed and a chair. A suspiciously silent ceiling fan rotated smoothly as I dropped my rucksack on the floor. It was the type of set up that could leave a lot of people out

of their minds but might be just good enough to get right into your own head. The guesthouse owner's mournful eyes couldn't completely hide the artistry of the way he'd once communicated, but now it was gentle civility and a silent plea not to be asked questions that prevailed. I obliged him and offered an advance. He shook his head and said we can sort out money whenever I decided to leave.

Time laid it out for me that way, or at least that's what I thought as I clambered onto the roof at sunset to be met by four fellow house guests. Such ideas were now almost out of me, at least when I was off the tourist trail, but being flung back into it after the previous few months probably had rustled up the dying embers of a connection. They nodded towards me, continuing their conversation. "Well it reaches places that cannabis, as beautiful as she is, cannot... beyond the limits, past the truncated cycle of blockages associated with overuse to the pure golden flow of connection. It blends with our primary reason to be here: to interface with plants and access the indescribable infinity. There's nothing to it but to do it." He looked Swedish but his English contained an unforced tendency to ebb and flow. I later found out he was half Dutch, half American and one hundred percent public school.

"Yeah, but what does this have to do with the vitality of the music we've been talking about," asked a softly-spoken Parisian. "And for somebody who quits eh-roee-en, you sound like an advocate." I was busy blowing the dust from my fake credit card holder.

"Because quality remains in music... and in everything else for that matter. And we always remember the quality. But the commercialized is forgotten and we constantly need to ask each other the name of this hollow shit." Out of the corner of my eye, I saw his expression gather up as he drew deeply on a chillum. He held the pipe over his head and then turned to look at me, signalling with his eyes.

"Always," asked the Parisian.

"Well, sometimes," came the smiling reply. He motioned with the chillum once more. I was finishing loading Assamese grass and Burmese solid into a bowl and passed the chillum on to a silent



Scot, who smiled through ravaged yet unerringly lifeless skin; it looked like it had been through the mixer one time too many.

“You were in Parvati, right Jan?” asked the fourth voice. It sounded Italian without the ups and downs.

“Yeah. What’s in your pipe, friend?” Jan asked, turning to me.

“No tobacco; just some grass and Burmese solid.” I passed it to him and nodded.

“It tastes like opium.” He looked at me with raised eyebrows.

“No... same supply lines. I can really make it taste like opium if you like.” He smiled and nodded.

“So a bunch of Europeans have been living in caves and tree houses, and it got right out of order,” added the Scot. “They’d been living on cans of beans and such. The locals ignored the first few but then they started fucking up the area.”

“Yeah. I met some of them in Malana,” replied Jan. “So?”

“So, long story short. They went and started a cult, with some crazy ceremonies to Shiva and such, nay knowing that the locals up there take that sort of stuff way seriously.”

“They would,” interjected the Italian or Romanian or Portuguese. I had it narrowed down to three after I ripped a few hits of Jan’s chillum into me. It wasn’t great, but when you have two pipes going around a party of five, with some king-sized grass joints about to be introduced into proceedings, it wasn’t bad either.

“Aye, why’s that?”

“Because there are still real Shivaitees up there—some part Buddhist or something else, but the real deal.”

“Aye, makes sense because most of the tourists got messed up by a group of white-robed Shivate priests according to the two that escaped.”

“Where were they from?” asked Jan.

“England.”

“Mmm... they may be telling the truth then,” replied Jan. Laughter rippled among us.

“They got too fucking high and made up a story to cover some crazy sheet they did,” proclaimed the Parisian.

“Okay, now you’ve all hurt my feelings,” said Jan, gathering his long blond hair in a bobble to stop it falling into his eyes as he

tried to navigate two chillums and a joint coming to him at the same time. "I'm going to pick on France now."

"Give it your best, you shopkeeper," replied the Parisian, forcing a smile from the Scot, before asking me my name in French. I replied in my best Gallic patter. Sceptical glances were exchanged as I was beckoned towards the circle and away from my position hanging over a turret, locked into a cerise sunset.

"I shan't belittle the beautiful knowledge and art your country has produced, but why do you get so annoyed at being made fun of as irrelevant?"

"There is no one who wants to be called irrelevant," stated the Parisian.

"But you know we all are, my friend," replied Jan.

"Which other nations have been ridiculed so much that have given so much?" The Parisian couldn't elevate his indignation.

"You should be thankful you are still remembered. What about the Scythians, the Tokharians, the Toltecs. Does anybody even speak of them anymore?" replied Jan. "Their ways have been subsumed and people don't even notice their reflections in other cultures. Their influences live on right now, sleeping under our noses, and still no recognition."

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The next time I ventured out of my cell and upstairs for sunset watch, a couple of days later, there were two Germans face-to-face on the roof clasping each other's shoulders with noses almost touching, close to hyperventilation. Jan was playing backgammon with the bloke I'd now decided was Portuguese and expounding to no one in particular. "I only believe in the dialectic as that can be proven," claimed the Portuguese. "The rhetorical stuff can't."

"But all those provable things were once unprovable," retorted Jan as he secured another piece. "And it was during that stage where the thing you believe in was formed."

"But they have been proven."

"But they came from the same source as you deny."

Jan and the Portuguese both seemed to be oblivious to the mutual encouragement the Germans were giving each other as they

elevated themselves into a Dusseldorf acid ascent. "I'm feeling it now," hollered the younger of the two.

"Don't worry," assured his friend. "If you start to go out, I will read the Book of the Dead to you. It will bring you back peacefully."

"Egyptian or Tibetan?"

"Which you like?"

"Tibetan is more calming." With his hands on his younger friend's shoulders, he smiled manically while unravelling in a stream of gibberish punctuated with piercing jewels: "A lost man can find his way by listening to the constant tune." He exhaled. "The peace you've lost is waiting to come back." They truly seemed to be doing it for themselves and nobody else, and I let their utterances blow past me without comment. As I produced a packet of skins from my pocket, one of the Germans walked towards me with his hands out. I was about to take a step backwards, their words suggesting they might be off on a bad one, but he simply held out a bag of weed. "From Holland," he said before returning to his friend and claspng his shoulders again, slipping into gibberish while breathing violently.

"So why did you give up such a life to come here?" asked the Portuguese.

"Well," croaked Jan, setting his stead to convince himself of what he was about to say. "I became interested in the idea that living to the full in parallel with ultimate reality is more likely to be achieved by someone doing a simple job in the field with true purpose and operating as a recipient, as opposed to some rich adventurer desperately trying to round out his personal portfolio of experience."

"So?"

"So, I was becoming the latter. That's why I decided to jack it all in and start from scratch."

"Is it okay if we play some Floyd?" blurted the younger German.

"I think I lost my connection with Floyd when I was doing a derivatives trade," admitted Jan, laughing. The young German looked worried.

"Go ahead," the Portuguese replied. "Why didn't you get payments from the government... you know, unemployment

payments. You must have paid a lot of tax.” He looked squarely at Jan as if to test his colours.

“Well. I was a bit sick... or unavailable for work as they say.”

“You could get some sick benefit?”

“You should never go on benefits and give in to your illnesses. If you do, the government dictates the game and you spend your time navigating ultimately fruitless angles with bureaucrats. But if you divorce yourself from them and get off the grid, then you can play the big game and spend your time navigating infinity.”

“But how will you survive without money?”

“Ye... I’m working on that at the moment. I was in danger of giving the best of myself to my employer. And that’s a mortal sin. It’s okay to play them if you have to, but never roll over and submit... because even if you think you have things in order, a submissive soul is what you eventually become.”

“But isn’t it right to submit to God. Isn’t that where all great art comes from? It was the submission of the great European artists to God and Christianity that led to some of the greatest art ever. How could it be so if it’s not from a submission to God?”

“What about Egyptian art?” replied Jan. “They submitted to a dude who said he was God. And there are many other examples of submitting to a man, even to crazy men.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’ve never thought about it before, but it seems that tribute to or inspiration from even a tyrant can result in spectacular art.”

“Are you saying that is because God doesn’t exist?”

“Or because God, whatever that means, is behind everything of value.”

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I dropped my bag in a cheap guesthouse just off Sudder Street and made my way to the best dhaba in Calcutta, or at least the best for a tourist who wanted a mango lassi with his thali. All the while, I was being trailed by a decrepit old man hissing offers of every drug under the Sun and ignoring my quiet refusals. The guilt from not buying drugs off a street hawker would have been manageable if the same story didn’t play out on most of the

surrounding street corners. Inside the dhaba, I dropped my body onto a wooden bench and ordered, pausing to register that I was back in a city brimful of energy. I'm not sure whether it was altitude gain or something bigger I'd brought back down with me. Whatever the case, I didn't flinch from spooning the various elements of my thali with metronomic rhythm into my mouth when a new type of street philosopher thought he'd spotted a mark and invited himself to introduce me to his story. "Do you know what love is my friend?"

"You're looking at it," I replied, crunching on a suspicious piece of cauliflower.

"No. Real love my friend." He wasn't old enough to be doing the guru thing, but too old to befriend random tourists. He must have been a dealer.

"Listen. I take a shit with more love than you'll ever know." I'd reached a detached serenity even with my coarsest wind-ups. I suppose my heart wasn't in it anymore.

"Why like this brother. Are you angry I disturbed your dinner?" I never missed a beat, each spoonful hitting my mouth at an interval of seven seconds. "I want to tell you why loves fades. That is all. May I?" I gave him my best Shivaite bow and pushed the naan bread towards him. He tore a piece off, chewed it gently and cleared his throat. "Love is the intersection of those moments of enlightenment with the person who happens to be with you at that time. That's why the love fades away." I nodded while one-shotting the remainder of my lentil soup. "But don't be discouraged my friend. This doesn't mean that love does not exist. It's really just a chance thing, a mathematical probability based on how many times you feel this light and who you are with at that time."

"Then where does the love go to?" I asked "Was it really ever there?" Winking, I offered the rest of the thali to him and walked out into the soupy night air. I toyed with the idea of traipsing down Sudder Street but opted for a spin around the market. The shops were all closing up, and there was something I liked about the ghosts of the day loitering around after the shopkeepers had packed all their stuff away. It didn't take long to lap myself, straggling traders hopefully glancing at me, trying to induce some good-luck business. The realization that I was unintentionally teasing them directed me back through the main

entrance, and there under a street light I saw him berating a pair of frail-looking Scandinavians. I checked my step so as not to break his stride.

“Just because you felt something you’ve never felt before by accessing a different part of your brain, and you weren’t able to explain it, doesn’t mean there’s proof of God.” He looked healthier, leaner and more tanned, but India hadn’t changed him one bit. I started walking again to feel the pause. He turned and saw me. “Yes, perfect timing,” he continued. “Luke, tell these people they’re deluding themselves.”

“I’m in no position to do that, Cam.” I nodded to the Scandinavians, who took the opportunity to peel away from us.

I don’t know how long we stood there talking. For all I felt that any common ground between us had long since disappeared beneath my trail, I still liked him. There was an unlikely humility in his savaging of all those who dared to flake out for even a moment. And when we were approached by an upwardly grasping businessman with a story to tell, he treated him with the brutal candour that only those without prejudice can employ. “It is the same proportion of people from the upper, middle and lower classes that contribute to society and evolve as people,” the man announced.

“Wrong,” Cam barked. “Rich people contribute more and spend more time trying to understand advanced aspects of society. So, don’t even come at me with that fake yogi nonsense.”

“My friend, you are suffering from an illusion. Richer people don’t succeed more; they just had the advantages of the system or of inheritance. Most of them stay rooted in their groups, never expanding or evolving.” I saw the eyes of a man who’d receded from society and delved deep into theory to placate his competitive urge. He had that jaded look of someone ready to quit. I stayed silent.

“Annual tax returns and cultural patronage would suggest differently,” replied Cam, his eyes bugging out.

“The symptoms of their existence may be consuming expensive products, just as the middle-income groups may be going to middle income venues while the poorest struggle. But it’s the same proportion of each that stays within its limiting organism.” And that was as much as the local had to say; a casual prod would

have collapsed the structure he'd spent so much time building. I flashed my eyes at Cam and motioned with my head for him to follow me.

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"It's insane out there, totally wild." I was looking at our shared stashes sitting on a chipped Formica table that an extra fifty rupees a night had secured Cam.

"I've gotten used to it," he replied.

"I'm not talking about India." I looked at the distilled offerings of our journeys. It was a small amount of gear but as good a cross-section as I'd seen: Naga opium, Assamese grass, Nepalese bliss and a tola of Green Gold that Cam had brazenly juggled through customs on an internal flight to Calcutta.

"You're talking madness before we've even started."

"The first world, whatever the fuck that means," I stated between pulls on a combo chillum. "Behind all of that consumerism is a primordial soup of nuttiness and wild behaviour waiting to emerge." I passed a chillum to him and waited for his take.

"So business is about fucking people; it's always been that way... since the first barter. Anyway, it all balances out in the long run." He drew sharply three times before taking one long smooth pull.

"You've been practicing," I said.

"The people who fuck others the most end up with more cash to secure their genetic heritage."

"Maybe," I admitted, "but the ones who contribute the most leave their quality behind, and they are ultimately more influential."

"How?" It was the first time I'd seen a look of intrigue on his face.

"The same thing that is special everywhere and nowhere."

"Are you sure it's still around?" I didn't answer; instead I began to mechanically make my way through the rest of the plant forms on the table. We sat there for two hours, listening to a mash-up of instrumentals, occasionally smiling at each other but mostly mentally preparing for our routes home.

I staggered back on to the streets of Calcutta, veering between icy sobriety and palsy-like fibrillations as I synthesized

what I'd taken in. The energy of a land that had fostered soul and reflection was fast disappearing from India, just as it had from the West, with only flailing waves remaining. Images flashed past me on the short walk back to my bed: a vista of middle-aged photograph hunters trying to grab some quality from antique monuments while backpackers snapped away beside unlikely shop fronts and advertising hoardings. And in those final-night moments, I felt a congressence, everything from the original spark through the sentence then flowing through me as an organism more sophisticated than the layered hive I found myself in.

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Sinclair drained the last of his scotch as he pawed at the final loose page of Landell's writing. "What is this bloody mess? Scrawls of what... for what? A neat ending?"

Sitting on my bed in a figure of four, I eased through the remains of the Green Gold Cam had swapped with me, now only an hour to go before I would step onto the homeward travelator that signals the end of a journey. I wondered if there was anything I could carry from my ooze through the mountains and down to Calcutta, but there was no room for anything else as the memories blended into one mass that coursed through me. I was wide open with no say in the matter. The only shapes I could pinpoint were the darkened perceptual snapshots that had not so randomly appeared along the way. And as I accepted that I neither was destined nor particularly wanted to write a book, I decided to scrawl down a few thoughts that had come to me but somehow not induced me to invent a slew of contrived situations in order to force a narrative. In the haze of a finely-tuned high, I scribbled them down, unsure of my intention.

*The takeover by consumerism illustrates how one virulent meme can lead all of us in the wrong direction, and the more economies expand the farther we are travelling in that wrong direction. That's why it's important to flex the frontal cortex, stay in that zone and feel the outer regions of your brain... ceasing to affect your thoughts; deactivating those regions is the key to their control. Oh yeah, and a few things you should keep in mind:*

*Logic and spirituality have been caught in bed together.*



*“There are many paths to God”... yeah yeah, but most of them are dead ends.*

*“Seek and you shall be found”... or even better, look and then wait to be found; Jesus, it wasn’t so hard now, was it?*

*It’s all fine and dandy going on a solo exploration to India, but we all need people. Note the joy of connecting for even a moment. That said, nothing beats creation, the limbic flash bang wallop as everything else fades. That’s why the best art is always destroyed immediately.*

*And if there’s one thing you can be confident in doing it’s going back to source... even all the way to the one-man show that began in the mists of time where the truth resided, not in the now business. Live in the source, not in the past, for personal and life choices. But remember... there are still lone swordsmen setting up truth after the source... they’re the ones.*

*The first rule is to be human... it’s not in any creed or philosophy. Be a human first when considering all decisions—a street mechanic told me that. I think his message was to try to stop inflicting your will on others. After all, we are just nodes interconnected in the malleable super-brain.*

*How can you trust your feel? Maybe it’s wrong. Feel is never wrong, you just misinterpret it sometimes. It’s not the game, or the contest, but the patterns that underlie the attraction you feel to everything and anything. It’s about oscillating between the free-flow and good practice—meditation, mental exercises, physical wellness—between the romantic and the classic. It’s the flow of the synthesis; being informed by that flow is where the secret lies. It’s not just about your flow with Nature but about how it merges with different places, meaning the mind, way, form and actual locations creating this blend.*

*Never make a huge leap to something; always remember the most likely explanation at any juncture you reach. But do take a huge leap to nothing... it’s the only place worth taking a huge leap to.*

*You can never really improve on Nature, or maybe it’s just impossible to add to quality; don’t subtract, and build functions that have value enough to not antagonise Nature. But never sacrifice the union between yourself and Nature—that’s what makes you happy regardless of your social position.*

*Don’t forget to be very careful with your life sometimes and very reckless at other times. I suppose the difference between an artist and a psycho is a good sense of smell.*

*My journey culminated thinking about something I’d once heard someone say about the great fires that destroyed libraries and mandalas being the end of a knowledge cycle... but that quality would remain. I laughed at myself as I threw these burning notes*

into an insignificant tributary of the Howrah, wondering how much of my writing was purely natural and how much was grinding... and if that was the method.

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